

1. The first step is to identify the problem or question that needs to be answered. This involves understanding the context and the specific requirements of the task.

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Kunapipi



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The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

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The Lie of the Land

She had come to him shortly after he had taken up the farm. Fifteen years, but the day was full of hope and he remembered it like yesterday. She had tumbled down from the truck, long-legged and spindly like a young girl, and stood in the paddock before him, her eyes bright and wild with fear at the bare endless spaces about her. She had never left her mother's side before, on a coastal farm, ordered, small-fielded, lush and English. But this brown vacancy could swallow her whole, her body seemed to say, there was nothing to hold her in. It was days before she allowed his hands on her. And even then she would shy away from him, frightened and skittish, if he so much as raised his voice in irritation or anger. But as the weeks passed, she was gentled by his warm tone and sure hands, often seeking him out, coming to stand beside him if he was working in the home paddock, her huge brown eyes full of liquid incomprehension.

'That heifer,' Marjorie would laugh, 'I think she's in love with you. Moon struck.'

'Don't be daft.'

'The way she follows you about. I think you talk to her more than you talk to me.'

And in fact he had acquired the habit, well not of talking to her exactly, but of talking out loud when she was around. It could be lonely out in the paddocks. He had found it a comfort, when he straightened up from the job of work he was doing, arching and rubbing the pain out of his back in the sun, to find her there, her head lowered, waiting patiently for him to scratch behind her ears or feed her the lump of sugar that he always carried away from the breakfast table with him. A sweetener for the other lady in his life, Marjorie would say.

He would lean across her shoulders and roll a cigarette; then, as the blue smoke whispred and curled in the morning air, they would contemplate his progress together. 'We'll need a couple more droppers in that stretch, Malsy,' he'd say, 'if we're to keep the bastards out of the wheat.' When things were bad, there were two years when the wheat had rust

and the whole crop was nearly ruined, he found it easier to talk to Maisy than to his own wife. Marjorie would only worry. An English farm girl, she had never really taken to life in the bush. He felt the need to protect her from the knowledge that this land could dry the bones out of a man, leaving him bleached white and salt in spirit while it burnt the skin from his back. Marjorie might speak his own fears, if she knew the full truth, saying it was madness to stay; scrabbling year after year in that burnt soil which God had staked out for the crows and other black creatures who passed blindly over it from time to time.

Better, he resolved, after their first year, when drought had left the land and everything on it helpless and gasping, to keep the full measure of his bitterness from her. 'Just one good year, girl,' he'd say to Maisy, watching the thin clouds drift like wraiths on the hills to the north. 'Just one, that's all I ask. Then I'll make it all up to her.'

Not that Marjorie was soft. She had borne her own troubles with calmness. Having to send the two boys to school in the city had taken the heart out of her for a time, but she had seemed to recover. 'Besides,' she'd say frequently, as if reminding herself, 'it makes them all the more precious when they do come.' When school holidays were due, she'd fret for a week before the boys arrived. The farmhouse, normally kept spotless, would be turned inside out, the boys' beds made up with crisp fresh sheets days before in case school broke up early and they came unexpectedly. In eight years it never once happened. And then on the day, she'd be up before dawn and, taking the old tub out into the yard, wash her hair, combing and brushing the wet auburn tresses until they trapped the light from the flat rays of the sun. She was like a girl again, preparing for her lover to come home. She would stand for an hour staring out into the paddocks while her hair dried, shivering; but he knew that he should not speak to her or touch her. She would be winding the threads of her life back into herself, stilling the fear in her belly that this time she had lost them. They would be changed, no longer boys, their flesh grown strange and hard to her. She would be unable to touch, to enter the world they had constructed away from her.

At such times he kept clear, moping around the edges of the yard. He would check the level of the water tanks or dig fitfully with a trowel at the hard soil around the geraniums she kept in pots along the laundry wall. A kind of offering. The farm dogs would prowl restively at his heels wondering why he hadn't gone out to the paddocks yet. Until, finally, they would catch his eye. Shouting with relief 'Those dogs need a darned good brush,' he'd dive inside and, emerging a moment later with the shoe-box of brushes and steel combs, set extravagantly upon them. He'd

sit on the laundry step and, holding one of the dogs between his knees, rake the combs back towards him through the burred and tangled hair. 'There, that feels good, doesn't it, Darcy? You needed that.' The others would sniff and whine about his knees, trembling, less in the knowledge that their turn would come than at the nervous excitement they could smell upon him.

He would brush with his hands, his eyes on Marjorie's back. He knew the stiffness against him that had come upon her. She would be fighting in herself the resentment that welled up, unbidden, unanswerable, her flesh divided at his having sent them away from her. A hard man, they were only boys, babies. A good man, the boys' father, their futures lay in school. There was no place for them in these empty baking plains. Finally, shaking the last of the shadows from her body, she would empty the soapy water bubbling into the dry red earth and, without speaking or looking at him, go inside.

He could feel her moving around the house. First, she would go to the kitchen and check the swelling loaves of bread, the scones and cakes she had left warming in the oven. The boys usually came about mid-morning and the breakfast was kept until then. Next, he knew, she would be drawn to the boys' room at the front. She would stand in the doorway for a moment, suddenly too shy to enter. The breath would be sucked out of her by the empty tidiness of it, the great fronds of the date palm in the front garden trailing their long bars of shadow across the bright walls. It would seem all wrong. A prison. A tomb. Not what she had meant at all. Near tears, she would fall upon the room, scattering the cushions and pillows, pulling toys and games from the cupboard in tumbling disarray. Worse. The younger boy's teddy, lying askew and broken-limbed at her feet, accused her of months of neglect. She knelt down and picked it up. The fur, normally rubbed flat and shiny by the boy's warm turning sleep, had grown hard and spiky in the dry air. Its coarseness set her teeth on edge, and she thrust it back on to the cupboard shelf. Hobbling around on her knees, feeling hopeless and defeated, she would slowly set the room to rights. Then, without a backward glance, flee to the kitchen again. The warm cooking smells reassured her, but she had left herself nothing to do. And so she would slump against the sink by the window, her eyes travelling back and forth along the red ribbon of road that ran past the farm, watching for the first cloud of dust in the distance that would tell her the bus was coming.

Knowing she was there, just feet away from him but unreachable, he would be unable to stand it any longer. Throwing the dogs off him, he would march resolutely across the yard towards the barn. The dogs

would snap their jaws on nothing, dart and yap at his heels, overjoyed to be moving at last out of the shadow of the house. The barn was wooden, not tin or corrugated iron like all of the other sheds. Warm on winter nights when the trees snap-froze and even the tin sheds cracked with ice and frost. He had built it, he said, for new-born calves. But 'Calves, huh,' Marjorie had sniffed, 'nothing's too grand for that lady.' And in fact Malsy had taken up nearly permanent residence and had to be shoed each morning out of the warm steaming dark.

He had acquired the habit of stopping by the barn before he went to bed each night. Just seeing the animals are settled,' he'd explain to Marjorie who'd smile without looking up from her knitting or the book she was reading. 'Bedded down,' he'd add unnecessarily. He wouldn't go at once but hover around the door waiting sheepishly.

'Well, go on then,' she would say at last, giving him the permission he would deny he had sought or needed. 'what are you waiting for?' And off he would go happily, whistling into the dark. The dogs, knowing where he was going, and preferring to stay in the warm kennels where they were, would simply acknowledge him by raising the lid of one eye and tracking his dark familiar shape across the moon-lit yard. One might whimper quietly, suppressing the impulse to follow him. In the barn he'd pitch a forkful of hay down from the loft into the feed-bin, then stand for a while running his hands on her smooth flanks or clapping the loose liquid dewlap that hung thick and healthy under her throat as she snuffled in the bin. No matter how he felt, she was always the same. He could depend on that. 'Well, girl, we made some real progress today,' he might say. Or, 'If it doesn't rain soon, we can forget the crops for another year. Maybe for good. Become townies again, or get a small dairy-run down south. You know she'd like that, don't you?' Whatever his tone, Malsy would turn her head from the bin and, arching her neck, rub the side of her face in short buffeting blows against his hip. He would resist pushing back hard against her, and in the tension that flowed between their bodies, something would be resolved, affirmed, a wordless contract that somehow they'd see it through together.

On mornings when the boys were due home, he'd not go to the paddocks but take his time mucking out the barn. The dogs, sick of waiting, would have gone off rabbiting in the dry creek bed. He would stop every few minutes and, leaning on his fork, gaze out through the open doorway where motes of straw and dust teemed in the brilliant sunlight, out to the same road he knew Marjorie would be watching from the kitchen window. He was aware only of emptiness, the vast desert spaces of desire and intention that separated them. Not born to it, he

had come to love the land, finding in its extremes, its desperate moods, a strange consolation. But Marjorie was frightened by it, seeing on those few occasions when she came out into the paddocks with him only the bleached bones and skulls of animals and the dun ribs of earth, broken and flaking, extruded through the thin cover of soil. There might still be places, she could barely conceive it, where no human being had ever stood. The land was unloved, unblessed, no wonder men went mad in it.

Her only joy was spring when purple and scarlet wildflowers dressed the salt bones of earth. Then she would venture out in the early morning, out beyond the yard, and paddle barefoot, dreaming, crushing the dewy flowers under her feet in a gleaming English meadow. 'Maisy,' she would, call down towards him where the animal stood, her own calf nuzzling at her flank, 'Maisy, daisy Mai-sy.' The animal would turn her heavy head and, without pausing for a moment from chewing her cud, draw this strange creature's cries into her own unblinking silky contentment. 'Maisy, you're beautiful. And your baby,' she'd go to cuddle it and the calf would spin its rump around by its mother's legs and, not letting go of the teat in its mouth, roll its eyes and gaze timid and watchful up at her. 'No wonder he loves you.' And, suddenly seeing her again, he could love her too; once more she would be the Marjorie he had married, the opaque winter shadows fled from her face. 'Not half as beautiful as you, girl.'

But most of the year she stayed close to the house, miles of land, foot-galling and broken-backed, between them. She would complete the chores inside by ten, then spend an hour before the sun grew heavy weeding and tilling the small plot of vegetables in the farmhouse yard, or tending the shrubs and seedlings that straggled bravely in the dust along the borders of the house. She would plant them as close to the walls as she could, taking advantage of what little shade there was under the eaves. An hour's gardening would leave her feeling wrung dry and dizzy and she would retreat guiltily to the shade of the house. Locked inside its walls, she could feel her flowers suffering, perishing silently around the boundaries of her life.

Sometimes, for no good reason, in the middle of a job of work, perhaps he'd be stretching the wire on a boundary fence, he'd find the breath catching in his throat and turn sharply in the direction of the farmstead, imagining a cry had come out across the paddocks to him from its silent walls. It was as though the wire had sung aloud with pain under his hands. He'd stand terrified for a moment squinting over to where the white homestead shimmered and quivered in the midday heat, then shake his head and bend his back to the wire again; 'Don't know what the

woman does all day.' But, really knowing, never asked. It became a tacit understanding between them. On occasions, realizing her lack of interest in the farm, he'd bring her a bright gift from the paddocks: a twist of wildflowers or the sight of a heron stalking the spongy marshlands priest-like after the rains. She'd smile slightly, catching his tone without listening, and go on preparing his dinner.

After they had eaten they would sit on the verandah for an hour, enjoying the evening breeze and watching the last rays of the sun flatten and lengthen across the land. There was a time, neither night or day, just before full dark, *gloaming* Marjorie would call it, when the gullies would fill up with shadows and the stringybark and white-fleshed gums would straggle untidily towards the house. The farm dogs would prow, sniffing the air and whimpering. All around them they could sense the earth opening up. Animals strange to light would slither, shoulder their way up from deep fissures of rock; reptilian mouths gaped grinning to repossess a world older than the rocks themselves. 'Good night for hunting,' he would say, watching the moon ride full-bellied up the white stony ridges. And in fact something might thrash in the long grasses just beyond the front fence. 'Old Joe'll get himself a belly-full tonight.'

Marjorie had seen old Joe only once. She had been out in the yard weeding her plants in the early morning. The sun was just beginning to burn but the sweat that broke on her back was cold. She stopped every few minutes and turned around quickly, as though she expected to catch someone watching her. But there was nothing. The paddocks only stretched shimmering brown and empty as far as the eye could see. She stooped to the weeding again, willing herself not to turn around, but couldn't stop the cold animal prickling of her scalp. She was being watched. She knew it. Something was watching her; its eye, malevolent and cold, grazing on her naked shoulders. Without turning she bent her head and looked back under her arm. Just in time to see the old dead tree by the fence — blink. And writhe upon itself falling, the whole grey twelve-foot slack-skinned length of it slithering scabble-clawed down the black trunk. She shrank back clutching the wall of the house. The goanna turned its head towards her — she could feel herself being sucked, unresisting, helpless, into the green empty well of its eye — then stumped slowly away towards the rocks drawing the heavy reptilian tail in its wake.

She would never venture by herself out beyond the gate at night.

In the barn, remembering her terror, he leaned on the solid handle of his fork and rubbed the heel of his palm against Maisy's blunt forehead. 'She'll feel better soon,' he said, 'once she's got the boys around her again.'

Maisy closed her eyes and lowered her head in pleasure. 'You know what it means to her, don't you, girl?' Maisy had been allowed to keep her own calves until they were full grown. The others were all shipped south to the city markets. But the previous year's calf would be her last. She had nearly died with it. He had stayed up all night helping to deliver it. The calf wouldn't come and Maisy, after eight hours of silent heaving labour, the froth caked hard on her lips and her eyes white and flecked with blood, dropped dumb and helpless on the straw. He too was exhausted and would happily have fallen beside her but knew that she would die. The calf must be got out of her; whatever happened she must be kept standing. 'Come on, girl,' he had pleaded, 'just one last try' and somehow, with a brutality he would not have suspected in him, heaved, kicked and dragged her struggling to her feet and locked her in a stall so that the wooden shafts pressing on her sides kept her upright. Able to offer no more, she gave herself up to him.

There was only one thing to do. If the calf wouldn't come by itself, he would have to drag it out. By now he was sure it was dead inside her. He hung the flickering lamp from one of the stall posts and stripped off his jacket and shirt. Crossing between her and the light, he was aware of his own blunt shadow like some gross predator bearing down on her. He hesitated only long enough to slap her roughly on the rump; 'Hang on, girl. Here we go,' and, bunching his fingers into a fist, plunged his arm into her. Pushed deep. The wet soggy mass gave way to hard tissue and he could feel the muscles, strained hot and full with blood, close around his arm. Beyond the elbow. Maisy bellowed for the first time and arched her back, throwing up a bridge of pain. Her hind legs buckled, wrenching his arm and shoulder down, but the wooden struts supporting her belly and flanks held her up. 'Easy, girl. Easy,' he cried out, feeling from inside the taut quivering cables of pain that grappled his own body to her. He pushed again until his arm was almost swallowed up to the shoulder. And found it: the calf's leg stuck athwart the neck of the womb. It felt odd; spongy, rubbery, not like bone at all. It had taken the full force of all the monstrous pressure.

He was hardly able to remember the next hour at all. He managed to bring the calf's two hind legs together and pulled, simply pulled — Maisy could do nothing — pulled, sliding and skidding on straw wet with blood, water and faeces, finally braced himself by placing his booted foot up against her haunches and tore the slack bundle free from her, slipping finally so easily — out. Dead. The wet weight of it slapped to the floor, its jersey skin gleaming darkly in the lamplight. Totally spent, he remembered to pull the handles that would release Maisy from the stall before

collapsing on the straw beside the dead calf. As he closed his eyes, he saw her turn and, plodding dumbly over, begin to lick the blood and remains of the liquid sac from the still body.

Just as her warm sandpaper tongue now raked his hand, breaking his reverie in time for him to see the clouds of dust billowing out along the road.

'Here they are. They're here,' he shouted to her and, throwing the fork down, strode almost running out into the blazing yard. The day's advance surprised him, and he staggered blindly for a few steps while his eyes grew used to the sun. 'Marj, Marjorie, they're here,' more in celebration than to inform her. She would barely have left the window all morning.

'Marjorie, you'll miss them,' he shouted into the house from the back step.

'You go,' she called back. She sounded distracted. 'I've got to get these scones out.'

It was always the same. Idle all morning, at the very moment they arrived she would find a thousand things that suddenly needed to be done, couldn't wait.

'They'll expect you.'

'I can't.' She almost screamed at him.

The bus was nearly there. He turned and hurried towards the gate, the dogs yelping excitedly at his heels. 'They're here,' he said. Their red tongues lolled stupidly in anticipation. The bus wheezed up to the gate, two boys still in school uniform tumbling out before it came to a halt. 'Dad, dad,' they shouted. 'Darky, Rusty.' The dogs were in a frenzy. He had to kick them away from the gate to get it open.

'Peter, James, you've grown,' he yelled, 'how you've grown,' tossing the younger one on his shoulder. 'Your mother won't recognize you.'

'Mum, where is she?'

'She's inside. Making the best breakfast you're ever likely to eat. Now let's get your bags.'

Their high voices, running over one another, carolled like magpies all the way to the house: 'How's Maisy, dad? did Rusty have her pups yet? was the drought as bad as you expected? is Pearl still here?'

'Whoa, whoa,' he laughed, tousling the older boy's dark hair. How old was he? Thirteen ... no, fourteen. Almost a man. 'All in good time.'

'We're doing science next term,' the younger one offered.

'Science?' His hands felt suddenly rough and awkward, cradling this strange gift. 'That's nice, boy,' he said.

'I've been doing science for three years,' his older son reminded him

quietly.

At the entrance to the kitchen he held back, the two boys blocking the doorway in front of him. They peered hesitantly into the dim room as though they were not sure of what they would find. Marjorie stood by the stove, wringing her dry hands on her apron. The corners of her mouth crinkled in what was intended for a smile. He wanted to push them, to propel them into her arms, go on, she's your mother, you don't know how the woman's been waiting. But knowing how animals may shy at the most intimate connections of flesh, he waited.

It was the suspicion that all that dryness might dissolve itself in tears that finally drove the younger one gasping out across the dark mile of polished linoleum that separated them. 'Mummy.' His mother's body drew him in, folded about him, her eyes brimming with enquiry still fixed on her elder son. Seeing the boy start towards her, he hefted the bags and made for the front room, expelling as he did the dead weight of air that he was surprised to find was straining at his chest. It would be all right. He would leave them for a while, and they would stitch together yet once more the torn and ill-fitting patchwork of their lives.

While the boys were at home, Marjorie would be a girl again, drawing energy from their bright bodies. She took them on picnics, venturing farther into the bush than she ever dared by herself. They were aliens to it too, but their innocence protected her from visions of ancient horrors. They competed with each other in spotting strange animals and birds or playing hide-and-seek (she found it strange, how many hiding places there were on the empty plains) or scrambling, last one to the top's a rotten egg, up the crumbling dead-wall face of the northern ridge. Occasionally she got the jeep out and drove sixty miles to the nearest town. She paraded in the main street with her two sons, showing them off to the few acquaintances she had made on shopping trips or when she had gone there with him for the cattle sales. They would linger in the shops, and she loved to buy them small gifts. Perhaps a clasp knife or a bush hat like his father's for the older boy. And coloured pencils for her young son who was keen on drawing. Then they'd stop at the cake shop for tea. She never went there by herself any more. Grown unused to company and small talk, she was intimidated by the waitress and the nods of encouragement from the townswomen. Even the neat gingham cloths on tiny rosewood tables troubled her with intimations of another life. But the boys made everything familiar, rounding the place out with their laughter and their gross unconscious appetites. Careless amongst such fragile china.

In the evening they listened to the radio or read, and, as night came

on, the younger one would quietly leave his book or drawing and, moving to his mother's side, curl up warmly against her.

'Tired, dear?' she asked, stroking his hair. 'Bed soon.' And then, as if she feared to be the cause of even that separation between them, 'Ten minutes more, and then daddy will see you off to bed.' He looked up from his paper and, catching her eye, smiled briefly that he understood: 'That's right, son. Early to bed and early to rise...'

When bed-time came he would tear, it felt like it, the sleepy child from her side. She sat unresisting, the impression of the child as he was lifted from her still clear in the outlines of her body. Her face, dumb with pleading, pulled at his heart as he carried his son up to the front room. He felt tired, ages-old like Abraham, scarcely possessing the strength to raise the boy up on his high bunk and lay him out on the spotless linen sheets.

As the days splashed through her hands, she became tense, incompetent with desire. She would cling to him in bed at night, passionate, demanding, as though she might tempt, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, some more enduring promise from him. But always it eluded her, shining clear and fiery just beyond reach. And so, learning to blame him, she withdrew into herself again, returning to its dark store-room the treasure she had dusted off and found to be of little worth. When the day for their departure came, she was calm and practical. She stayed in the house packing the boys' bags and cleaning their room — nothing must be left to tidy away after they'd gone — while they took leave of the land and animals with their father. Not much was said between them. But it was as though, in the end, his quiet strength possessed them. They helped him with the chores around the yard and sheds, feeding the hens and stacking firewood by the laundry wall. They had done with their holidays games. Now his example gave shape and order to their emerging lives.

Never one for extended conversation, he simply said: 'Do well. You'll be wanting work of your own in time.' He hoisted the younger boy up on to Maisy's patient back and, marvelling at a trick that had puzzled him for weeks, smiled: 'Science, eh? What do you think of that, girl?' Maisy snuffled in her bin of oats with satisfaction. 'Oh dad, what would Maisy know about science?' He was amazed. 'Well ... nothing, I suppose.' The boys laughed and he found himself half joining in. 'No more than me, that is. Won't be long before you'll be leaving us both behind.'

Marjorie came out with them to wait for the bus. Her hair, normally worn down when they were home, was imprisoned once more in a tight bun behind her head. The light had laid bare the naked bones of her

face and her eyes were wide, milked of colour by all that blue distance. A flight of white cockatoos, worried by the dogs, wheeled squealing and squawking in indignation around the house. She watched them settle fluttering like damp cloths, she almost thought *souls*, in the shade trees. The boys chafed, anxious now for their other lives, shying away from her whenever she approached to pat down a flyaway strand of hair or pick a stray piece of lint from their grey suits. The uniforms which she had cleaned and pressed so carefully made them strange to her. She wanted to hold them. They made tangible her own uncertain sacrifice. But as she bent to kiss them goodbye, her nails felt dry and brittle on their skin. Passion crumbled like dust in her mouth: 'Goodbye, Peter. Look after James. Goodbye, darling.' Their father shook hands solemnly with each of them. Standing side by side they would wave until the bus turned the corner out of sight. Then made their way slowly back to the house. Even the dogs were subdued, while the cockatoos fell from their perches on an empty land.

'Don't worry, girl,' he would manage by way of consolation, 'they'll be back.' And they were. But less frequently as the years passed. She tried not to feel resentful when one of them wrote asking if he could spend the holidays with the family of a friend, perhaps skiing or staying on the coast. Not that he wouldn't come if she really wanted. But how could she object when it was a chance he mightn't get so easily again? It was never the same when only one of them was there. Fretting for the one who was absent — their games seemed only ever made for three — all the grace and girlishness fled from her body. She lost all sense of adventure. If she did go out into the bush, her old fears returned. A gust of wind would set the trees braying with laughter. She was aware only of roots writhing on broken soil.

Even the farmhouse grew monotonous with heat. Whole hours might pass when the one who was with her would slip unnoticed from her side, tired of cooking and housework and indoor games, and look for Maisy and his father in the paddocks. 'Does your mother know you're here?' he'd ask, guilty for enjoying the boy's quiet presence. 'She'll miss you.' He had resolved long ago that giving his sons up to her was the price of his own obsession. But seeing the boy's reluctance, he wouldn't press and eventually Marjorie would join them, half-complete in the semblance of her family.

Until one year when they didn't come at all. James was now at the university and the older boy had a job in one of the cities down south. It wasn't, he tried to assure her, that they didn't care; they had still sent cards for her birthday. It was just that they had their own interests, their

own lives to lead. She wouldn't want them to be tied to her apron strings forever, would she? For an answer, one blazing summer day she simply carried out into the yard all the toys and games from their cupboards and set fire to them.

Seeing the flames from the paddock, he raced back to the house. She stood with her thin arms held out to the bonfire as though she were warming herself or even praying by it.

'Marjorie. Why?' The eyes that passed over him were calm, vacant. He could see James' teddy melting into a black and yellow sticky mass, a grin still fixed in the tortoise-shell button of its eye.

'Why?'

'They died in the night,' she explained matter-of-factly. 'They were making the house cold.'

When old Dr O'Grady came, he seemed irritable.

'It's as far to go back as it is to come out,' he complained climbing back into his battered black Ford, 'and the roads get no better the second time. If I'd known she was like this, I wouldn't have bothered. You could have brought her in with you next time you came to town.'

'But I still don't know what's the matter with her. What's gone wrong?'

'Bush neurosis,' he said, slamming the door. 'The pills will let her sleep — but I can't answer for dreams.'

'Neurosis?'

'It gets nearly all of them in the end. The women.'

'What should I do?'

'A few bits of flowers,' he jabbed an angry finger at Marjorie's garden. 'What can you expect? They don't work the land. They've got no relation to it.' Dr O'Grady was shouting now as though the husband were to blame.

He started the engine and the car began rolling towards the gate. The farm dogs yapped and snarled; their teeth bit madly on the unyielding rubber.

'But what should I do?'

The car pulled up sharply and the doctor's face squinted back at him. He looked surprised, even shocked.

'Do? There's nothing you can do,' he said. 'Not now.'

And so they settled down to the long summer days of her madness. Weeks passed, one day drifting into the next so that he lost all sense of time, while Marjorie sat in the living room clutching and unclutching her hands. At night she lay up against the wall, dry-eyed and staring. He tried to comfort her but found he had lost the practice of words. Her flesh became alien to him; his hands rustling like paper on her withered

flanks. When she did allow him to touch her, she would draw his hand to her belly: 'There,' she would say, her voice rising in excitement, 'there, can't you feel it growing?' Sometimes he imagined he could feel it, a hard knot of tissue or muscle embedded in the flesh, but could never be sure. His hands were shaped to the ranker growths of animals. 'It won't be long now,' she'd say, smiling and turning away from him. Clutching the bright promise of her secret to her.

Since the fire he had become watchful, never moving far from the farmhouse. If he went to the paddocks, his mind immediately strayed back to where she lay in their dark room. Troubled by fears in his own broken sleep, he removed all matches from the house and kept the sharper knives locked away with his shotgun in one of the sheds.

But he couldn't be watchful all the time. One night he awoke and found the bed empty. The light was on and her nightdress lay crumpled by the doorway. 'Marjorie?' he cried out. One of the dogs on the verandah whimpered, trembling on some ancient nightmare. 'Marjorie.' The walls of the house lapped him, cold and silent. He ran from room to room, all the lights were burning. Then, snatching up a blanket, slipped bare-foot out into frozen puddles of air. 'Marjorie!' He saw her almost immediately, the white moons of her flesh gliding softly between the black trunks of the acacias. Her body seemed slim and firm with resolution. He ran after her. 'Marjorie!' Hearing his cry, she halted, standing patiently until he came up to her, her back still to him. 'Marjorie, oh Marjorie,' he pleaded, wrapping the blanket around her, 'what in God's name are you doing? You'll catch your death.'

'He was calling,' she said softly, 'didn't you hear him? He was calling my name.'

He gazed around. 'Who? Who was calling?' The rocks glinted crystal with starlight.

'Old Joe, of course,' she said, looking at him as though he had lost his senses. She let him take her by the hand.

It felt cool and fresh on his rough palm, and he led her like a child back out of the darkness to the blazing house.

For a brief time she seemed better, even getting up to join him for dinner, though she would forget to eat if he did not remind her. Everything was an effort to her. 'You're so thin,' he'd say placing the fork gently in her hand, 'you'll waste away to nothing.' Despite his hunger, he could only manage to pick at his own food. The days in the paddocks and the constant watchfulness at night were beginning to exhaust him.

Twice he found that he had locked Maisy in the barn at night and forgotten to release her next morning. Except that he wasn't sure that it

was the next morning. From the dung pats and soiled straw it could have been two days. Or even three. Each time, seeing her look of reproach, he rushed back to the house to find whether Marjorie had been similarly neglected. There was no way of knowing. The plates in the sink, rimmed with grey fat, might have been from that morning's breakfast.

On the verandah in the evenings he would sit helplessly and watch the bright sun flickering and guttering in the dark pools of her eyes. She would catch him watching her and reach out to take his hand, smiling as though she understood his plight. 'Soon,' she would say, making a round pearl of pity with her mouth. He had not known that peace could taste so bitter. Even the boys' visit — they came as quickly as they could in answer to his letters — failed to waken her. She let herself be led around the garden, supported on each side by her tall sons. 'Poor things,' she would say, patting their arms in consolation 'the sun kills them.' Stricken with youth, there was nothing they could do but return her to the dark shelf of her life.

On the morning the boys left, he sought his usual refuge in the barn.

'It's up to us now, girl,' he explained. 'We've got to face it. She's just not going to get any better.'

Maisy's blue tongue lapped comfortingly in his palm. He ran his other hand over her shoulders; she had grown thin and coarse with age. How had that happened without his noticing? Her flanks shivered as he touched the bare patch where she had rubbed herself against the stall-posts in the barn and the hair had refused to grow back. 'I've been neglecting you, girl,' he said bitterly, 'neglecting everything.' And so he threw himself into the farmwork once more, holding fast to the one certainty that he knew. The rhythms of the day controlled his mind. Rising early, he yoked himself to the shoulder of the earth, labouring through the midday heat until the dropping sun mercifully unharnessed him. Mostly he was aware of vacancy; the burnt face of the earth across which he crawled, and the sky above him endless with white heat. Between those fiery plates his spirit was pressed out. He would lose himself until a stone jolted his hands or a blister burst on them. Then he remembered. There would be a flash of resentment at her total dependence on him or the sharp rush of guilt when he realized that he had worked happily, not having thought of her once for hours on end. But as one day plodded in the furrows of the day before, and the earth turned steadily beneath his feet, he even dared to hope again: 'We'll manage, Maisy girl. Somehow we'll see it through.'

Scarcely a week later Maisy failed to respond to his morning call. He searched the yard and the barn and the home paddocks, half-angry that

she should have made him late for the ploughing. It was mid-morning before he found her. She was lying on her side on the sharp-crustrd clay of the dam in the bottom paddock. 'Maisy! Maisy!' She had fallen from the high shoulder of the dam and he could see from the attitude of her body that a hind leg was broken. Bone ground on bone in his hands as he tried to straighten it, and Maisy screamed aloud with pain and fear. He dropped to his knees beside her, and she struggled to raise her head. One horn had been snapped off clean at the base in her fall; she gazed at him with lopsided apology. Her tongue filled her mouth, and the air that sang and whistled through her nose burnt on his cheek. How long, he wondered, had she been lying here? He brushed away the flies that swarmed at her eyes and, scrabbling down the bank, filled his hat with the warm rusty-coloured water. 'Here, girl. Drink this.' He tried to lift her head but the sun was draining his own strength, so he placed the hat to her lips, pushing the brim up so that it formed a funnel against her mouth. 'Come on, girl.' Maisy gulped desperately. The water caught in her throat and, when she coughed, ran streaming like blood from her nostrils.

Her leg was too badly broken to think of splinting. He placed his hat over her face to keep off the flies that again droned and sawed at her eyes. The crows sat bunched black in the trees waiting their turn after the flies. It was hopeless. He slumped to the ground beside her and lay with his arms stretched over her panting flanks.

Steadily the sun drew the energy and will out of him. He watched a crow perch on the horn of a branch. Crows are the sun's children, he thought. The sun was black too, and he lapsed into it. It burned and he woke. The ants, he noticed, had begun. He must act, do something. If only Marjorie had been well, there might have been some chance to save her. But Marjorie lay spreadeagled by the heat, wasted in darkness by the salt spirit of the land — and by his pride.

She had begged him to leave, to give up. He remembered her face: *They died in the night.* But no, he must hang on, must draw the plough of his own necessity across her body. It was her blood which had watered his crops. Now he watched them burning, turning back into the red dust from which they'd come.

The paddocks swam in waves and swirls toward him; there was Marjorie born auburn-haired and laughing on the tide. He knew she'd come. 'Marjorie,' he cried out. 'Marj.' The trees broke apart in fluttering shapes of angels; they carried her name wheeling in black veils of shadow across the sun.

Marj. Marj. Marj.

Flesh stirred baking in the fire beneath him. He must get up. She was his responsibility, she had served him faithfully all these years.

Marj. Marj.

Get up. Flames ran in the paddocks, the whole earth was bleeding. 'Marjorie.' He pushed himself up on her flanks; the air rushed from her, she was still breathing. He plunged into the blazing paddocks towards the farmhouse, knowing he must get there before he collapsed. No one else could do it from him. Gunmetal broke star-cold and certain in his hands.

Somehow he would find the strength to put her out of her misery.

Mark O'Connor

A JAVANESE PIETA

I

*In fumes the girl-mother squats,
newest son on lap, hawking
hot bottles of 7-Up
to incurious tourists.*

Cameras snatch for that face which the street
has battered to heavy-lidded peace. She is
expert in heat, dirt, hunger, the arts
of drinking and dunging in public
canals; hides from rain under blue plastic
pieces; knows birth-pangs and suckling
joys, her and her son, *belum orang*. *

**belum orang*: Indonesian phrase for a child, lit. 'not yet a person'.

Lacking hope she lacks fear.
Hatred subtracts; sufficiency
calculates; misery
breed.

Only Nature, say her eyes,
cruel as tigers.

II

What will your child do?
At the going down of the sun
and in the morning
we pray to forget.

So begin, small boy
in hunger to gnaw your mother;
beautiful sad-eyed boy who may
be already past saving;
whose mother already
swells once more.

I would offer her help
and she betrays me
from love to logistics.

III

Yours, mother,
the face nations fear in the night;
the unstoppable tender machine!
For you missiles are launched.
You have never been blamed. You will
scream your complaint in atrocity photos.

So slowly, politely, I find this small coin
take up your gift of tepid gassy water, proffer
this sponge to sustain your pain
with a coward's vacillation.

Michael Sharkey

SUNDAY: WAITAKERE

Morning and two parakeets
walk puriri boughs
and sip the flowers

letting petals fall; above
the rise, a hawk is doing rounds
against a pewter coloured sky

and in the house
where yeast is working in the flour
furry bees hang over wine.

THOUGHTS ON WALKING THROUGH A NORTHERN HIGH- LANDS TOWN

In my thirty-sixth year,
many friends have vanished.
Living in the eighties
isn't meant to be a breeze.
Even the Prime Minister is looking sketchy now.
And what am I?
a mass of energies
accreting small-time honours in the provinces,
or load of earth that bends toward the soil?

Time fleets,
in marble slabs arrayed up on the hill;
clouds pass, a cricket match continues
and cicadas sing in reeds
along the creek.
Each day a little rain,
a little shine and wind;
each day a little pain,
another day behind;

clouds pass, a letter comes,
a friend is far away.
Nights are long,
the cool wind's in my hair
that's turning grey;
In the northern graveyard gate,
a brown snake lies in sun,
and bluebell petals flutter down
where ants and spiders run;

down behind the offices,
the evening drunks appear,
walking through the empty plaza
underneath the clock:
hands point on every side
a different time of night,
and children stand
outside the pizza bar
in neon light.

The fretted ancient hostelrys
pull down their blinds
and dim their lights at last,
and publicans collect the glasses
while late trucks roll past.
In parks the willow trees are budding;
eucalypt's in bloom,
and all of this ghost-city
falls asleep below the moon.

Thea Astley



Thea Astley at Macquarie University, 1978

I'm still an apprentice at writing. I'd be doomed if I thought otherwise. Nobody's work improves unless they're pretty humbly aware of its failings...

I love the English language — it offers the most beautiful smorgasbord. It's an inexhaustible smorgasbord...

Symbols? I don't know. Anything can be a symbol. Was Moby Dick a symbol — a huge penis in the Atlantic?

Many people have speculated on suffering as being an impetus to the creative instinct. Similar to being a Catholic perhaps, with Catholicism's early emphases on the nature of guilt, damnation, eternal punishment, the beauty of suffering (not involuntarily but voluntarily), being a Queenslander in Australia provides much in the nature of achieving possible apotheosis.

Given a choice of talents, I would plump for a musical one, an ability to play jazz piano. For there, as you play, instant orgasm.

I am incapable of playing the game of the writer-taking-himself-seriously seriously. Flippancy is my defence. What's yours?

When I start writing I'm either unhappy, angry or indignant. After a while I feel a kind of mad amusement and then I feel a genial compassion for the character I'm sending up.

Thea Astley, in slacks and loose shirt, lolls there, arm and cigarette resting over the back of the chair. Her face is open, dark eyes pinned to her mood, and a shock of dark hair crossing her brow. She doesn't like talking about herself, yet words come easily to her tongue to tie down her subject precisely. She seems relaxed, sits forward leaning on her elbows, but keeps smoking ('purely an oral habit. I don't inhale'). It is easy to imagine her as a girl — mischievous, critical, lively as Miles Franklin before her, and as questioning of life. She likes to talk about life's finer nuances, has a lovably candid way of declaring her enthusiasms. She is sensitive to both the hurt of beauty and the absurdity of life. She chats about a lecture she was invited to give in Italy:

'It was in 1977. I stopped off briefly in Rome and then went on to Venice. I liked the feeling of Italy — grubby, warm, friendly, slow. I stayed in Venice for four days. It was absolutely beautiful. I stayed in a hotel next to Vivaldi's old church. I know it's corny but I was quite sentimental about it, took off my shoes so that my feet could feel the old stone. It must have been the same stone that Vivaldi trod. Venice was so lovely that I cried — I literally cried. It was a revelation.' She pauses, butts her cigarette. 'And what else did I do? Oh, yes, on the flight there I had an exciting experience. I sat in the pilot's cabin while they brought the plane down in Bangkok. They invited me up. And the funniest thing happened. Someone picked an old grubby exercise book from near a window, and started reading out these things. And there's the pilot sitting in front of me, putting it all into action — «Ailerons!» And the pilot goes click, presses down a button. «Wing flaps!» Click! «Tail lighes!» Click! And so on down the list. There were about twelve items, and he read 'em all out from this thumbled book — it looked like an old manuscript. The pilot followed instructions, and the next minute the plane's on the ground. Here I was clutching the back of the assistant pilot's seat. And I thought, my God, this is how it's done. Ah, yes, that was as revelatory as Venice!

Her face relaxes, creases into a laugh. Outside it's hot and windy — the air seethes round the house in the Sydney suburb of Epping, rasping the hard palm fronds across each other in the garden. Its dryness thrashes in the westerly, running out from the two-storeyed timber house through bamboo and lawn, oleander and pittosporum to the deep-

guttered street. This is where most of Thea Astley's eight novels have been written — at the downstairs table in the big lounge room, or in other corners with good window light, while she put on the chops and potatoes for her husband Jack and her musician son Edmund, or prepared lectures and corrected essays for her students at Macquarie University, not five minutes away in the car.

For the last twenty years Thea Astley has lived in Sydney while writing about that other place, her home state, Queensland. All but one of her novels are set there. They bring alive many facets of life in the huge tropical state — schoolteaching; small-town society; the musical coteries of Brisbane and its hinterland; the problems of extra-marital love, of adolescence, and of the Catholic religion both for those inside the church and those without. Others of her novels treat the world of the journalist, or the unthinking racism and violence of Queensland's past.

Thea Astley, back in 'the south' for a brief visit, sits on the edge of the greening swimming pool behind her house in Sydney and talks about Queensland, where she has made her permanent home since retiring from Macquarie University.

'Yes, I've always thought about Queensland a lot. I suppose it's my dream country if you like. From here, these cooler climes, I think of it as sprawl — physical sprawl in the sense of its size and distances, mental sprawl, bodily sprawl that its climate brings out. The livin' is easy! Things are green there, even in the Dry. Actually I don't like the heat, but I like that do-it-tomorrow feeling. And I like the plants, the rainforest, the water cobalt off the shore, the tropicana. It's my dream country. And you know — the dream country is always where you aren't!'

She was born in Brisbane in 1925. Her father was a journalist on the *Courier Mail*. Her mother's father, Con Lindsay, who was Canadian born had also been a journalist whose regular column appeared in the magazine *Bohemia* of the Bread and Cheese Club in Melbourne. He was also a member of Sydney's Dawn and Dusk Club. From both men she inherited a love for the sound of words, and a delight in using them. Thea Astley had her primary and secondary education at All Hallows Convent near Brisbane's Storey Bridge. Her schooling began in the economically uncertain days of the early 1930s and turned her out as a student teacher doing an Arts degree part-time in the grimmest days of the war in the Pacific, with Brisbane full of American soldiers and the city prepared for invasion. Thea Astley, like most writers, finds that her experience stays with her, etched into her consciousness. In a hundred places in her novels and short stories she has retailed in dramatic terms experience imbibed in her childhood as she grew up with her one brother

in Brisbane. On the rare occasions when she has spoken and written about her life and writing she has also touched on this, as in an article written for *Southerly* in 1970:

I've always been enormously responsive to scenery, landscapes with or without figures; my dad singing shanties in the sea-rotted houses we used to rent along the Queensland coast when I was a small girl, one particular green valley, yellow with light, in the Tweed, my head stuck out of a bus window draining it in and thinking 'I must keep this one'. I was thirteen then and I've still kept it: a still pre-storm late afternoon in the Mary Valley, bruised purple over pine forests as I walked off from my last degree paper — economics — the script decorated with cream stains from the cake my supervisor's wife brought me for afternoon tea. These moments are neither cerebral nor academic, but I offer them as reasons why now I still want to write about the Queensland littoral.

Her convent upbringing was rigorous. It implanted in her attributes that have lasted and that she does not regret. Her teachers were very good, setting an example of dedication and self-effacement. They were perfectionists. From them Thea Astley took a strong work ethic and an appreciation of the value of self-denial. In comparison with the Catholic church she knew then, however, today's church disappoints her.

'It seems to have lost its dignity,' she says. 'Then at least it was a tough religion, but now it seems unbending in an ingratiating way. There's no longer the Latin mass. In fact, I look to see the shadow of Christ in all the Christian churches, but he seems to have been pushed out by property. They pine for him, but seem to have grown into big public relations organizations that are empty of the old values.'

At the same time, the Catholic upbringing she experienced had its other side — what she saw as an emphasis on guilt. 'Catholicism is an insidious religion because it constantly forces children to examine themselves,' she said in an interview in 1965. 'All of a sudden you're 14 and you think: Heavens, I had a dirty thought! This sort of guilt doesn't seem healthy to me.'

Music and language, two key elements in her life and writing accompanied Thea Astley's schooldays. Her piano teacher, Arthur Sharman, took her through Heller studies, Clementi sonatinas and Beethoven sonatas — it left her with 'a lush reaction to the Romantics, a strangling urge to sing lieder with no voice, and the deepest adulating envy of performers like Richter and Vince Guiralidi,' as she wrote facetiously later. Her study of languages — English, Latin, French — continued through school and at the University. It stood her in good stead in her later craft with words. Her interest in literature and writing

was fired particularly by one of her teachers, Sister Mary Claver — 'an amazing enthusiast, a lover of books and the language'.

In 1942, the girls of All Hallows Convent were evacuated from Brisbane to the country town of Warwick, 160 km south-west of the capital, because of the possibility of a Japanese attack on Brisbane. At Warwick (later to become the 'Condamine' of her novels) Thea Astley finished her Senior School Certificate, being taught in a big hall that the nuns had converted for school-use, with brown paper gummed over the windows as a blackout precaution. 'We had air raid shelters in the grounds,' Thea Astley recalls; 'and often did rehearsals for bombing raids. We'd rush into the slit trenches with *The Elements of Deductive Logic* clutched under our arms. It often was the most exciting thing — the only thing that gave the school-day any point!'

In 1945, Thea Astley began an Arts degree as an evening student of the University of Queensland. After each day as a student primary teacher she went to lectures at the old site of the University which was then in George Street, Brisbane. It was still the period of the 'brown-out'. She raced home from classes at night through a city replete with air-raid wardens, pill-boxes, gun-pits and rowing American and Australian servicemen. 'I didn't know a single Yank,' she says. 'I must have been the only teenage girl in Brisbane who didn't!'



The town of Warwick in southern Queensland, to which Thea Astley's class from All Hallows Convent was evacuated during the threat of Japanese bombing in 1942. Warwick became the model for the town of Condamine in Thea Astley's novels

During that period of study and teaching, she began writing — 'a lot of facile verse, and surprisingly some of it got published.' When she was eighteen she met the poet Paul Grano. His first collection of poems, *Poems Old and New*, were revelatory for her — here was a poet whose touchstones were to be found in Brisbane, and in Queensland landscapes and country towns. She fell in with other Brisbane writers who called themselves the Barjai group. These were senior students from Brisbane High School who established a youth magazine for literary contributions called *Barjai*. It ran for five years. Her urge to write received a great spur from writers in the group like Laurence Collinson, Barrett Reid, Vida Smith and Charles Osborne. Clem Christesen, then a sub-editor working on the *Brisbane Courier Mail*, was another, with Peter Miller, who 'continued her beginnings' as a writer, as she puts it. Christesen was in the throes of establishing his literary journal, *Meanjin Papers*, at the time. But she didn't publish in *Meanjin* at that stage — she appeared in the *ABC Weekly* and in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Writing as Thea Astley, she recalls, she earned £3 for a poem, but under her pseudonym of 'Phillip Cressey' she was paid £5 — 'a genital loading', she says in her drawing way of flat Australian statement.



The Railway Hotel, Imbil, Queensland, where Thea Astley boarded during her time as a teacher in the small town in the Mary River Valley north of Brisbane.

But it was the loneliness of the out-of-school hours as a teacher in small country towns that started her in earnest as a prose-writer, a potential novelist. Her first school was at Mount Crosby, beyond the present suburb of Kenmore and close to the filter-beds that serve for Brisbane's water-supply. Her second was at Shorncliffe near Sandgate, her third in the deeper north at Townsville, and then at Imbil in the valley of the Mary River and at Pomona not far from there. 'I liked the teaching,' she recalls. 'Especially those mid-primary years around ten or eleven years of age where you can see the progress in the children so clearly. It's an age at which children are beautifully unaffected and generous.' But living in small-town hotels was often desolating. In 1965, she looked back on that period of her life in the 1940s. Her words conjure up to some extent the partly autobiographical portrait of the young teacher that she created in her first novel, *Girl With a Monkey*. The novel was based, as she explained in an interview in 1965, on her last day of duty at the primary school in Townsville, before she was transferred to the Queensland south:

There's nowhere so lonely as a country town if you're a young and somewhat priggish city girl. Even in places like Townsville you can be spiritually lonely. I used to go to my hotel room after tea and write and write, purely for something to do.

But country towns fascinated me for all their loneliness. Where else but Australia would you get the local constable closing the doors of the pub at closing time, and locking himself in with the drinkers. I used to lie upstairs and hear the laughing and the clinking of glasses and the sound of them playing billiards.

By this time Thea Astley had given over her piano playing in favour of writing. 'It seemed easier to turn to playing about with words rather than notes...An exercise book, a beautifully fluid biro and thousands of words that could be arranged in endless attractive permutations made the overhead idiotically cheap and the possibility entirely seductive.' She had also come to a realization that would provide her with the motivation and material for her novels over the next three decades. She explained it simply to an audience at Sydney University when she delivered the 1976 Herbert Blakelock Memorial Lecture, entitled 'Being a Queenslander: a form of literary and geographical conceit':

I realized the shabby areas of town and country which I publicly demolished to my southern friends but privately adored could be unashamedly declared as lyric argument. You see the nub of my paper is that literary truth is derived from the parish, and if it is truth it will be universal.

In 1947, sitting for her last University examination at the little town of Imbil, in the Mary Valley, Thea Astley completed her Bachelor of Arts degree. In 1948 she married Jack Gregson, an accountant. In the same year she moved from Pomona in southern Queensland to Sydney as a teacher for the New South Wales Education Department. It was then, separated from her own tropical home territory, and smarting at being dubbed a 'first-year' teacher in New South Wales after five years of teaching in Queensland, that her 'love affair with Queensland ripened into its mature madness', as she puts it. Until this time, her writing had not satisfied her. She regarded it as inept. But now she began to realize her power. Settling into the teaching of English in New South Wales secondary schools, she began to write in earnest from her Queensland experience, working mainly at night.

In 1956 she completed *Girl With a Monkey* based on her earlier life in Townsville. She eventually submitted it to Angus and Robertson. The publishers held it for two years, bringing it out in 1958. It is a novel that portrays the loneliness and helplessness of a young teacher in the face of her own relatively unfeeling assumption of superiority over her boyfriend Harry. Harry is a trench digger, untutored, determined, honest, and ultimately rejected. Their relationship is set in the midst of the milieu that Thea Astley knew well from her own experience — the boredom and banality of boarding-house life, the cramping restrictions of the teaching situation, the pecking order and unimaginative aridity of social life in small communities, and always the atmosphere of tropical living:

Most of the houses were built on stilts, some five feet high, some fifteen, but especially those which, although built on the gentle rise south of the river, tended to receive the full force of the January rains, partly because here they were so close to the sea and partly because on the whole all this side of town was much lower than the north bank. They were ugly and they were necessary. Especially you thought them ugly in mid-year when the mud had hardened and the fowls ran squawking below the building, latticed only with tarred up-rights, so you could see tubs and old packing cases and the underneath rain-water tank all jumbled together. But you knew they were necessary when the first flood-waters lapped the bottom step and the whole backyard and every other backyard was a shining lake whose level rose foot by foot till even the fence lines vanished, and at nights in bed you could hear the wavelets sucking at the tin ant-caps on top of the house piers. Some of the houses did not have lattice, but stood precariously on their long poles like swamp-birds. They were painted biscuit and chocolate, and some were even ice-cream colour, but mostly they were drab, lacking in windows and roofed with iron on which the rain drummed frenziedly from December to February.

Elie remembered how those worms had been preluded by heavy round drops that fell singly into the dust and bent the leaves, then, without warning, the rain had

fallen like a thick curtain. All through that first week she tramped home under the javelin thrust of water, bare-foot like the children, with her rain-cape soaked right through to the rubber and her umbrella a pulp, hardly able to find her way, so alike were the flat, flooded streets and the box-like houses. During the day, whenever a gap of watery blue edged its way into the sky, the whole class would point and laugh, and the men standing in their mud-splashed sports trousers along the verandas would light vague cigarettes and breathe the smoke in reverently in the first sunshine for nine days. But by two o'clock the gigantic cumulus would have rolled up from the horizon, heavily white and woolly with edges and underside dark-blue, and by three the whole sky would be black again with nimbus and the wind, springing up without warning as it did in these latitudes, would be on them with the first drops of the next storm.

Girl With a Monkey earned favourable mention in a literary competition. This spurred Thea Astley to more concentrated writing. In 1955 her only son, Edmund, had been born. Now with a child to look after ('my favourite production'), she wrote on, a little each day, sitting in bed at night with a pen and an exercise book. Her next novel, *A Descent For Gossips*, appeared in 1960. Its physical setting was modelled on the town of Pomona where she had taught for a year. The burden of its story is anger against the intolerance shown by the social set of Gungee, a small Queensland town, for two middle-aged teachers — one a widow, the other with a permanently hospitalized wife — who became lovers. Already developing in the novel are the concerns that perhaps dominate Thea Astley's fiction — her interest in the 'outsider' in society, and, as she has stressed many times, her plea for generosity and understanding in human relationships. Both Robert Moller and Helen Striebel, the teachers, are already marked out for suffering by being outsiders in terms of the values of Gungee:

At those times when the summer evenings drifted in from the sea in a green translucence that lay over the hills and paddocks like clear water and the after-noon lay ahead as empty as the sky limits, he would have liked Helen with him to share the silence or the idly dropped word. But his neighbours watched with unkindly interest the most trivial actions of a man who did not belong to any of the local clubs, refrained from attending any church, and found homes and bridge boring beyond endurance. Occasionally he played an uninterested game of badminton at the doctor's home, but that was not sufficient to excuse his lack of interest in sport. His love of books and music made him immediately suspect, and his preference for drinking at the hotel bars with the working class, instead of at the private polite parties, marked him down as rather common. He did not know, and he certainly would not have cared if he had.

In much the same fashion Helen Striebel was criticized by the women of the town, who resented the way she was able to keep to herself, disliking her because of a self-sufficiency that precluded the need to swap knitting patterns and sponge recipes and

allowed her to retire blamelessly to her room at seven. This sort of behaviour was accepted as a personal affront by the active women's organizations, who regarded it angrily as voiceless criticism of their behaviour. In a way perhaps it was, though it was unintentional.

Finally the strength of malicious gossip in the town sees Helen Srieibel transferred to Camooeal at the other end of the state. She has to leave, not knowing that a girl from a background of poverty, whom she and Moller had befriended in the school, has been goaded to suicide by the evil-tongued suggestions of her classmates, the sons and daughters of the town's gossips.

'The outsider interests me enormously,' Thea Astley wrote in 1970. 'Not self-conscious, phoney, arty outsiders, but bums and old ladies and people who are lonely, seedy and unsuccessful. I haven't travelled, but I assume — is this presumptuous? — that there must be Upper Mongolian and North Vietnamese Mrs Everages and Sandy Stones. There *have* to be...' And again, speaking of her published novels, she has written that they 'have always been, despite the failure of the reviewers to see it, a plea for charity — in the Pauline sense of course — to be accorded to those not ruthless enough or grand enough to be gigantic tragic figures, but who, in their own way, record the same *via crucis*.'

In 1961 Thea Astley received her first Commonwealth Literary Fund grant. The time it afforded her helped in the writing of her next novel, *The Well-Dressed Explorer*, published in 1962. It also was written out of anger. George Brewster, its journalist protagonist is fallibly human in his egotism and in the ruses he employs to entrap women and to retain his self-esteem, even to the extent of a self-conscious and anti-human attempt to deny the flesh that leads to his conversion to Catholicism. The book is rich with Thea Astley's bitter and ironic understanding of how ordinary human beings become adept at self-deception. The book, which shared the Miles Franklin Award for the novel, is also remarkable for its portrayal of the life of a man from boyhood to old age. The truth about Brewster and his love affairs conducted in the face of his patient wife is calmly revealed by Peter Reardon, the husband of one of his lady conquests, as he comforts his wife:

Reardon shrugged. 'Eat your dinner. Try to eat something and I'll tell you,' he said. 'Brewster loves no one but himself. He doesn't know that. He wouldn't believe it if you shouted it at him, but it is nevertheless true. He's not capable of selfless love. Can't you see? Enormous egos like his with little real talent to support them must seek an emotional support. He uses people.'

'But he did say he loved me. He sounded sincere.'

‘He puts love — or the words for it — in, so that he can take love out. And perhaps he did mean it for the moment. But it doesn’t go deep. My poor dear,’ he said, reaching across to touch her hand in tenderness. The disease he was cherishing within his fragile flesh and which was to carry him off in another year made him cough daily.

‘He’s by nature a bough-flitter. You must see it. Haven’t you watched him at parties, even when you are there, and all his obsession should be directed at you? Perhaps he wants to believe in the grinding racking emotion for himself, but the truth is he’s simply incapable of it. No one’s fault. Not even his. And he’s an utterly selfish man.’

Thea Astley’s full maturity as a novelist came perhaps with *The Slow Natives*, also written while on a CLF grant in 1964. It was published in 1965, at a time when she was teaching English at Cheltenham Girls High School in Sydney. It won both the Miles Franklin Award and the Moomba Award for literature. Its setting is Brisbane suburbia, in which Bernard Levenson, father and music examiner, and Iris Levenson, mother and lover of another woman’s husband, stumble on in their arid marriage, neglecting the needs of their adolescent son Keith until it is too late. His desperate absconding from home ends in near-tragedy. But in the background are other lives also, with their imperfections and needs — Leo Varga who acts as mentor figure and tutor for Keith; the down-trodden and inconsequentially violent youth, Chookie; the priests and nun whose path intersect with Bernard’s in the world of piano lessons and music examinations in Queensland provincial centres. Early in the piece Keith, talking to a girlfriend, appraises his father:

‘That’s what’s so ghastly. He loves me and I’m ashamed of him. He lets mum wear the pants because he simply isn’t sufficiently interested to care. He repeats his jokes and forgets things a kid would know and makes feeble puns and stops talking about sex when I come into the room. And now — now he doesn’t even play the piano particularly well.’

At the novel’s conclusion, with his son badly injured in a car accident, Bernard Levenson analyses his own feelings and those of his wife:

‘At least I am his father,’ Bernard said carefully. ‘But if we had a child now I wouldn’t be so sure.’

The blood paused in Iris’s face. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You know exactly what I mean. And, my dear Iris, so does Keith. And that is partly the cause of this bother. Oh, don’t cry. If you do that I’ll want to hit you. You entered on your whole little romance dry-eyed — and I knew — yes! Don’t be surprised. I was the willing cuckold. And don’t deny. I thought it might brighten your life. After all, we didn’t seem to be going anywhere. What had I to lose — that I hadn’t already lost?’

Now that he exposed his indifference to her she hated him, perversely, longing for him to want what he gave away so readily.

'No,' he went outrageously on. 'You had my blessing for what it was worth. Gerald was a clean, dull bore. But clean, Iris. I did like that clean bit. And I felt sorry for him, too, you know. It's no good being hurt when I say that. Only another man understands what I mean. After all, what was he depriving me of?'

'You go on about it now quite a lot for a man who didn't care.'

'But I didn't, Iris. Rest assured. That was a nice comfy cliché, wasn't it? But there was someone who did. Keith cared.'

'He never knew.'

'Ah yes. But he did.'

'How do you know?'

'In half a dozen ways that if you had been a more observant mother you might have noticed. The chief clue was his sudden aversion to you. Poor old Keith. He'd always missed out on something parental — father-love, you say. Yes. And then ... boom! Mother virtue collapses.'

'I don't believe you. You're only saying it to cover neglect.'

'No? Well, we can always ask him.'

Again in *The Slow Natives* Thea Astley employs without strain her eye for the details of a life lived on the Queensland littoral. Brisbane is palpable as a city in the book, from its parks, the riverside Terrace, the coffee shops and juke boxes of the Valley to the green wings of the *Monstera Deliciosa* on the walls of the Town Hall.

In 1968 Thea Astley ended her secondary teaching of English and became a senior tutor in English at Macquarie University — 'a position somewhat superior to the tea lady and inferior to the building security men', she recalls with some bitterness. Her next novel, *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, appeared in the same year with its closed-community study of a group of people confronting their frailties amongst the bungalows, native stores, hotel, hospital, and mission buildings under the palms at Port Lena on a tropical island.

'I wanted to put some of the characters from *The Slow Natives* in something of an isolated and pressurised situation,' Thea Astley explained. 'I chose the French-English condominium of Port Vila in the New Hebrides as the setting. And I introduced the details about a hurricane that was experienced there in the 1950s. I read up on it in *The Pacific Monthly* and researched it in the Mitchell Library. I went to Port Vila for a fortnight to look about and I gained some more local information about the hurricane.'

But of course that material was largely background to the interplay of character which is always Thea Astley's major concern — the development of Father Lake's 'personal problem' (a proclivity for young boys) that was hinted at in *The Slow Natives*, the 'stewed guilts' of the ageing

spinster Miss Trumper, Mrs Seabrook teetering close to the decision to leave her husband, while the wind builds to its final destructive force.

After *A Boatload of Home Folk* Thea Astley began to build the story of the novel that became her favourite, *The Acolyte*. It finally appeared in 1972. Its tale is told by Paul Vesper, an engineer and devotee of music who becomes the acolyte to Holberg, a blind composer. He is drawn to Holberg as if to a callous and self-centred magnet. But Holberg has other qualities — an urbane panache and a touch of musical genius. While Vesper helps him transpose his sinfonia at his house on Tamborine Plateau south of Brisbane he is a creature of conflict in his admiration and sympathy for Holberg in the musical sense, while feeling a loathing for him in his tantrums, and his regal manipulation of other people. His craven acceptance of his role as 'Holberg's eunuch' ends in a rebellious eruption, when he devises a metal sling in the bush and rains rocks on Holberg, his plate glass house, his piano and his attendant women and hangers on:

What is it I want to do? Make a last gesture? Fling one last comment? The house is spread out full below me, the glass panes this side gleaming leadenly in the last light through the rain. This is the last light. The last drink. The last exchange. Crouched in the coil of my anger, I select the most venomous of those polished river rocks and place it in the cup. What is cup? a distant voice asks. That other half of me cries with despair. The arm is trained on the house, but I must readjust the finder so that it will sling its load in memorable fashion. How memorable?

I unear the rain off the finder and the grief from my eyes and tremble the dial into position so that Taurus is about to discover glass and music. I feed another rock within hand's reach and fighting a sound symphony of accusations press the lever. Goall From below comes the joyous crash of annealed quarter-inch plate, and, seeking orgasm through the attached field-glasses, I discover I have scored a bull's-eye on the study and carried a fox-brush of pampas grass through to the carpet. My hands shake with the joy and the rage and the pity of it. Don't think, you fellows! our football coach used to pep-talk us. Get in there and kill 'em. I place the second scope in the cup and shift the range-finder slightly. Shouts are rising from below as if I'd made a find. Whillip! The second window blows stars and there is a violent gesticulating knot of people on the terrace. I whack another onto the roof for good measure and am just about to launch another and another and another when I see Jamie sauntering into the path of my vengeance, his hands cradling something, his head startled as a bird's. He is outraged by closed throats and planetaria of glass doors. There is blood on someone's face — Neilson's — and Holberg is ramping wildly between his wives like a betrayed sultan.

Of all her novels *The Acolyte* was the one that gave Thea Astley the greatest joy to write. In comparison with the others she did not notice the effort of producing it, at perhaps a half page each day, written between nine and ten o'clock in the morning before her first university class. With

it she had little rewriting to do, although most of her work undergoes revision. She finds that the length of her sentences in a first draft errs on the short side — 'old fashioned synthesis becomes necessary to lengthen them', she says. 'I have to work hard at it.' *The Acolyte* won the Miles Franklin Award for the novel in 1972.

Two years later, in 1974, Thea Astley published *A Kindness Cup*, her seventh novel. She and Jack Gregson had bought a holiday shack near Mackay in north Queensland. Not far away at the foot of the mountain was The Leap hotel, below a promontory in the ranges where in the late 19th century white settlers forced some members of an aboriginal tribe over the cliffs to their deaths. Among those who crashed to the rocks below was an aboriginal girl and her child. The child miraculously survived. The tragedy fascinated Thea Astley. She researched it, found out more details from the locals, and built her novel around the incident and its imagined aftermath. In the novel, Tom Dorahy, a former teacher in the town, who had known the young aboriginal mother, Kowaha, before her death comes back twenty years after the massacre, on the occasion of the town's celebrations. He hopes to bring to book the men responsible for the killings, who are now well-entrenched first citizens of the district. He persuades Charlie Lunt, the white guardian of Kowaha's daughter, to come back as a conscience to the town's festivities. For their pains Lunt is killed and Dorahy brutally beaten. 'I had a lot of trouble with the ending of *Kindness*,' Thea Astley explains. It is the true artist, a perfectionist, speaking. 'I'm still dissatisfied with it. But I can't see another way it could have been told. You see, the true climax, Kowaha's fall to her death, has to come fairly early in the account. And that makes Lunt's death, and the beating up of Dorahy and Boyd at the end something of an anti-climax. But there you are.' She shrugs.

Her next book, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* published in 1979, is perhaps most accurately described as a series of connected short stories, a discontinuous narrative, with most of the episodes narrated by Keith Levenson, the adolescent of *The Slow Natives*, now a forty-year-old.

'It's set in the town of Mango, a sort of combination of several north Queensland towns, if you like,' says Thea Astley. 'The book had its impetus — and its title — from an experience I had when I was on a lecturing tour for the Commonwealth Literary Fund. One night after dinner at a place near Rockhampton our host simply said «OK, let's go and hunt the wild pineapple». For those who don't know, the wild pineapple is a symbol, I suppose, for Queensland. «Wild» in the sense of savage, untamed. Actually I brought a wild pineapple back to Sydney from up there. It must have been 14 inches of fruit — a big one — without the spines. And when I opened it — it was bad. I don't know whether that's a symbol for the book or not!

So Thea Astley's fiction is work of density, of sharp experience gathered and used, of an inexorable build-up of power, of satirical irony and the phrasing that bites through sham and hypocrisy — 'I can always flush out a room in four minutes with some chamber music,' says her character Bernard Leverson, commenting on polite Australian cultural vacuousness. Or again, as she describes the middle-aged journalist George Brewster — 'the refusal to age spiritually despite the flagging energies of the body can be pitiful or miraculous. In George it was pitiful.' As a novelist and a person Thea Astley seems to understand so much. She knows a great deal about love — married and extra-marital, shallow and deep, adult and teenage. While her eyes are half closed, her chin propped on a fist, cigarette motionless, she is absorbing, analysing, perhaps even deciding on a wording. She knows the self-deceptions by which we all survive and which sometimes catch us up. She knows the logic of feminine illogicality, and all the male egotistical wiles and vulnerability.

Music and religion could be seen as constants in Thea Astley's work. They both serve as illustrations of how she uses her experience. Music is the greatest art form, she maintains, but also the most difficult. It is lost, in a sense, the moment it is produced. And jazz improvisation is a greater skill still — 'instant creation'. Her own musical background is deep; her husband Jack Gregson is a very knowledgeable collector of music; her son Edmund is a guitarist. Music provides a milieu in *The Slow Native* and *The Acolyte*. But Thea Astley has also used pieces of her own musical experience more specifically.

'I wrote the hands — I could see them — of my old music teacher Arthur Sharman into the story in the case of Bernard Leverson in *The Slow Native*,' she reveals. 'In the same novel I mention another incident I heard of — a person having his sense of pitch altered as a result of a stroke. In *The Acolyte* I build it more directly into the character Bathgate. It's based on a man I knew around the corner — a gallant man — who had a stroke, who was still tottering on, bringing soup to his sick wife. He was a Bach enthusiast, and played good piano. After his stroke, his ear for pitch was raised a semi-tone.'

As for religion, Thea Astley is no longer closely involved in the Catholic church, but still clearly has a love-hate bond with it as an integral part of her early life. She has been charged with wishing ill-will on the church. In an article in 1970 she responded:

I am not, as the monsignor (I forgive you monsignor) of the parish in which I live, but of which I am not a member, said 'out to destroy the church'. Forgive the syntax

too, and I won't alter a word of it. Twelve years of convent school life is a lot of time, a lot of figures in the landscape. I describe what I have heard, seen, deduced. That's all.

That misreading of her intent is matched in her view by the failure of critics, in many cases, to see that her novels are not intended to be cruel, that she was 'trying to wring those trachyte reviewing hearts with my sympathy for the misfits'. But her view of the critical approach is balanced:

'I suppose the critics are the flies on the meat, aren't they? Sometimes they hurt. But sometimes, on the other hand, I think they've been too kind. Their role is vital, though, in retaining interest in a work where it might otherwise have slipped from sight, died. It's the sort of thing Beatrice Davis does — she's not a critic, but a great publisher's editor, of course. She's been a remarkable force in Australian literature, taking what writers have done and making it better, taking the broader view all the time, publishing books that may not be money spinners, but which fill out a cultural tradition. Beatrice took up the manuscript of my *Wild Pineapple*, and after my eight months of writing on it came up with suggestions for worthwhile revisions.'

As she talks, there is always the impression that Thea Astley has grown beyond having illusions about herself. Her vaunted flippancy, for instance. She has been criticized for using the slick remark, the flash phrase. 'Well, that's me,' she says. 'I use a flippant approach to things I feel deeply about, you see. It's a defence. I dub some of the wives in the novels «cakemakers of distinction», and that's half-envy, and half-scorn, because I'm not so skilled at domestic matters like that.'

Coming to the consciousness of her craft, she speaks with self-knowledge born of trial and error and of long practice:

'I'd like to be seen as a prose-poet. I did write poetry as a girl — at a certain age you have poetry like you have acne. I still read it as stimulus to write prose — it stimulates the metaphors, heightens the word-use. But my mentors in style are people like Nabokov, John Cheever, or Updike. I don't see myself as a short-story writer — you have to see the moment, get it down so tightly. I don't do that so well. That's Hal Porter's territory.'

She is not a note-taker, a fact she sometimes regrets. In 1975 she took sabbatical leave in the USA, visiting Rollins College, New Smyrna Beach, Winter Park in Florida. It was her first trip overseas. She travelled the country by bus and train, chased Joe Pass and Ella Fitzgerald jazz concerts. Although a couple of short stories have come out of the sojourn, she fears she might lose some of the sparkling experiences she had there because she took no record. 'I missed those dark negro

faces, too, when I got back to Australia,' she says.

For more than ten years now she has balanced writing with University teaching, and before that with school teaching. In 1978 she was made a Creative Arts Fellow at Macquarie University. She likes young people, understands them, can relax with them, although she's concerned that the present young generation are selfish in a way that her generation could not afford to be — 'they self-indulge their psyches much more than we did, don't get insights from doing things for others. The philosophy of self as a *modus vivendi* is bad.' Her work load was heavy — nine tutorial groups of fourteen students each by two long essays per student each semester. She generally used to do her marking and write her lectures at home. As for her own writing, she finds that a room of one's own, in the Virginia Woolf tradition, is best. Once something sparks the idea for a novel, she does detailed planning, listing a couple of pages of incidents she is likely to use, then wrestles them into an order. She sometimes starts the detailed writing of a first draft at some mid-point of the story which she feels like writing and out of which she can get a sympathetic reaction that sets a tone for the whole work. Then she fills in the missing sections. But always there is the unplanned-for, the unexpected. 'In *Acolyte*,' she says, 'I had no idea that Vesper would build his sling in the bracken. I knew that at some stage the doormat that he had been had to rise up and bite the feet that used it — but not that he would do it by means of an engineered sling! As for dialogue, she has settled on the test of reading it aloud now, as she writes it, finding that she can then hear where it needs to be pared down and improved.

Now the Gregson house in Sydney is only a place to visit. In 1980 Thea Astley retired from University lecturing and moved to Queensland. In the course of the Commonwealth Literary Fund lectures she gave in 1970, she had travelled as far north as Cairns for the first time. She saw that mountainous coastline, where there is very little littoral, with the Atherton Tableland rising sheer from the sea, where the golden beaches and cerulean water are empty in the summer — 'just when they need the sea most the danger of sharks and sea wasps pushes people into the Tobruk pools all along the coast.' In 1972 Thea and Jack Gregson (then retired from his post as Secretary of the Board of Secondary School Studies) gave up their shack near Mackay and bought another at Kuranda with a frontage on the Barron River, 1,200 feet up the mountain near Cairns. That's where they live now, on their two acres with its garden and ten-square house.

The north has Thea Astley in thrall. '... When my plane circles the last

small white-housed town along the reef and I watch hungrily through the port window for the high green-blue rise of tableland behind that town, I feel always that I am coming home,' she wrote in 1976. 'Home in its very nature that one must be able to laugh at as well as weep over.' The atmosphere of the north is palpable again in her most recent novel, *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*. She talks on about the river, and the rainfall (Kuranda had 10 feet 10 inches of rain between January 1 and January 25 in 1978 and was designated the wettest town in Australia) and the rain-forest that makes distant Sydney seem a claustrophobic dream. She describes crossing the flooded Barron River in a rubber boat, a plastic garbage bag of manuscripts between her knees, part of her heavy summer reading for the Literature Board of the Australian Council for the Arts, of which she has been a member since 1978.

Having begun a novel about a gold-strike in 1978, Thea Azley was diverted by her interest in Christie Palmerston, a character of the Palmer River goldrush that took place north of Cairns. But will she write as well in the lassitude of the far north? 'It worries me,' she says. 'I might find in the long run that I just mow grass and drink tea. Xavier Herbert's output in the heat up there amazes me. But we'll see. I love the Wet. I look forward to getting back there, to hear that rain pounding on the tin roof...'

PAUL SHARRAD

Does Wongar Matter?

In 1978 a collection of 12 stories entitled *The Track to Braigui* was published.¹ This purported to be the work of an Australian Aborigine from the Northern Territory and depicted from within a tribal cultural framework the disastrous impact upon black life of white society in general and large-scale mining ventures in particular. The book carried

a generous preface by Alan Paton and was favourably reviewed in several major journals and papers around the world as making a major contribution to Aboriginal writing. The author, B. Wongar (B for either Banumbir — 'morning star' — or Birimbir — 'spirit' — and Wongar meaning 'of the Dreamtime'), has also had individual stories published in *Atlantic Monthly*, *London Magazine*, *Les temps modernes* and even *The Australian Women's Weekly*. He also has in print a novel (*The Trackers*) and another collection of stories, *The Dal*, is forthcoming.

No one, however, has met B. Wongar. Doubts concerning his identity have persisted in Australia for some time, fuelled by such events as the appearance of a book of stories about Vietnam in 1972 by a B. Wongar. This Wongar was supposedly an Afro-American veteran who absconded from leave in Australia to blend into the northern Aboriginal tribes. Coincidentally, Alan Marshall (of *I Can Jump Puddles* fame) who wrote the foreword to this book also co-authored a collection of Aboriginal myths with Wongar's unofficial agent, Streten Bozic. Bozic is a Yugoslav who came to Australia via France with a degree in anthropology. He lived in the Northern Territory for a number of years and worked at Gove as a miner.

Suspensions that Bozic and Wongar are actually one and the same were confirmed last year when Robert Drewe published an investigative piece in *The Bulletin* called 'Solved: The Great B. Wongar Mystery'.¹

A story is a good yarn is a fiction; and fiction has its own truth. Given the social conscience in the stories and their unique imaginative expression of tribal beliefs and attitudes, do we really need to worry about the real identity of their author? For the reasons set out below, I think we do.

On the face of it, Wongar's stories appear to be accurate guides to one section of Aboriginal belief and life style. The only possible error I can find is that, traditionally, tribal blacks are not supposed to mention the name of a dead person until a long time after the death. The fact that characters do in *The Track to Braigu* may, however, simply be a further indication of the decline of their society.²

Imagery is visually apt in the naturalistic sense: a polluted stream smells like a 'burst rotten turtle's egg' (p.39), teeth rattle 'like pebbles in a dilly bag' (p.29), and a derelict cattle-station is 'a deserted ant-hill' (p.25). Images are also a reflection of myths which explain the origin of natural phenomena through acts by heroes of the Dreamtime: the sun is 'like a rock pulled from hot ashes' (p.45), and the willy-willy's pillar of dust 'looks like a great spear thrown from earth and stuck in the belly of a

cloud' (p.25). There are several references to snakes (Jambawal, the cyclone, causes the earth to 'quiver like a beaten snake', p.19) which relate to the Gunabibi/Wonambri creation and fertility-myth cycles of the Rainbow Serpent.

The measuring of distance in 'camps' and 'voices' (pp.38,59) and the coldness of a night by the number of dogs it takes huddling around the campfire to keep you warm (p.79) is authentic, as are the indications of the importance of social transactions and communal relationships (Wonbri steals bread to feed his marooned prison-mates — p.23 — the imprisoned narrator in 'Buwad the Fly' 'dreams' his mother, grandfather and cousin as present and longs to 'rise high up in the air and head straight to my people' — p.53 — Rev. George places great store by his having shaken hands, eaten and drunk with the chairman of CHEAT — p.13 — and the narrator of 'The Miringu' feels the urge to return to his *dua* and *Tjirritja* moiety group lands).⁴ (A very nice piece of irony and compelling indication of the author's access to tribal thought is the Rev. George's application of the images of the tribal 'family' and its many conferences to the mining corporation's operations — pp.12-13.)

The overall attitude of acceptance shown by the characters, born of their faith in the abiding and unchanging nature of Dreamtime principles and the resultant inability to cope with social change and its disastrous cultural effects is reported by various anthropologists:

Aboriginal life has endured feeling that continuity, not man, is the measure of all. The cost in the world of power and change is extinction. What defeats the black-fellow in the modern world, fundamentally, is his transcendentalism. So much of his life and thought are concerned with the Dreaming that it stultifies his ability to develop. (Stanner, p.36)

The land is of paramount significance in these stories, and their major claim on lasting literary importance is that they are the first to imaginatively evoke the real and complex sense of immanence and transcendence which the land has for the Aborigine.

The mythic structure of North-East Arnhem Land is an active presence throughout *The Track to Bralgu* — an achievement in itself — and are duplicated by only a few other creative writers. The Wawalag sisters, Wudal and Djangguwul — culture-heroes who shaped the land; Nganug, the ferryman to Bralgu; the dustclouds from dancing spirits; Pingal, the moon and raingiver; Waruk, the bad spirit: all are there. The journey of the soul to Bralgu through swamps of yam is even mentioned (Brandt, p.79).⁵

I should make it clear that I am not claiming any expert knowledge of Aboriginal lore. All of these references can be verified from a cursory check in such basic anthropological texts as C.H. and R.M. Berndt's *The World of the First Australians* and A.P. Elkin's *The Australian Aborigines*; a fact which in itself may say something.⁶

Given this putative authenticity, we may well be inclined to accept the stories for the insights they offer into 'the Aboriginal mind', and, if we have any doubts about the identity of the author, to regard him with indulgence if not grudging admiration (either for his social motives or just his success as a hoaxer). We may even, despite the evidence, feel a reluctance to believe that we have been duped at all.

The main reason for this would be that the basic validity of these stories lies in their moral impact. Not for nothing did the author ask Alan Paton to write an introduction. Like his South African novel, *Cry the Beloved Country*, *The Track to Brodgi* is a cry of outrage scarifying the conscience of Australians, and staining the image of multinational mining corporations. As a political statement, these tales are powerful, and we can well believe that the mystery surrounding Wongar's identity might have been created for fear of retribution by government agencies, mining interests, and Northern Territory whites in general. It is no doubt because of their committed stance, too, that some of these stories first appeared in Jean-Paul Sartre's magazine, *Les temps modernes*.⁷

There is no question that the indictment of white encroachment upon black life in Australia is fundamentally accurate. Nor can there be any doubt concerning the need for an effective imaginatively vivid appeal on behalf of the Aborigines. At least until the beginnings of the last decade, the essay by the veteran anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner written in 1938, still rang true:

The Aboriginal problem is, indeed, very far away and unreal to the urban and near-urban populations of Australia, and to their leaders. Few of them have ever seen a blackfellow. The disappearance of the tribes is not commonly regarded as a present and continuing tragedy, but (for some curious reason) rather as something which took place a long time ago, in the very early days, and so is no longer a real complication. Nor is it accepted, save by a few people, as a matter for self-reproach. (p.4)

Most of the detribalised and semi-civilised natives would be shown to be badly under-nourished, and to be living precariously from hand to mouth on what in many cases is a wretchedly inferior diet. Many of them are short of the essential proteins, fats, mineral salts and vitamins. The number of Aborigines just over the threshold of scurvy, beri-beri, and other deficiency diseases must be very great. For instance, out of fifty-one children born on a station in central Australia from 1925 to 1929, only ten survived. (p.8)

The provision of so-called 'inviolable' reserves has long been a cardinal principle in Australia. A close scrutiny of the history of reserves would probably show that not one has gone unviolated. Gold-miners, cattlemen, prospectors and others have entered them almost at will. The 'sanctity' of the reserves, though still a catch-phrase of official apologies, is well known to be one of the most bitter fictions in the history of the Commonwealth. (p.11)

Unpalatable though it may be for the white reader, the message of these stories and Stanner's words is supported by the Royal College of Ophthalmologists, which sponsored a health survey in the mid-seventies of all significant Aboriginal settlements, and by the recent World Council of Churches inquiry.⁸ The continuing conflicts over land rights and the social and ecological effects of mining operations in the north of Australia also bear out the contemporary nature of Wongar's fiction.

As with many didactic works of literature, social necessity does not always make for artistic virtue. I think it fair to say that, while these stories have their 'harsh, bitter, magical' impact (to quote Paton), they are also frequently flawed by unusual shifts of register. Cutting naturalism or pathos suddenly changes to flippantly surreal satire, such as in the ending of 'Poor Fellow Dingo' when the rain-dancing dog/husband is carted off to have his dance recorded on computer, or in 'The Balanda Mob', which starts with a hot, cruel manhunt and ends with a ludicrous 'ship of fools' fantasy. Sentimentality and *dei ex machinae* in the guise of natural forces are allowed to undercut the tragic human drama (the shooting of Wonbri for looting bread — p.23; the summoning of Jambawal, or the devastation of Ngaliur in 'The Maramara'). The consistency and credibility of the first-person narrator's internal monologue is not always established or maintained (Mogwoi/Rev. George is alternately naïve and cynically knowing; the outside visions of the prisoner in 'Buwad the Fly' are not made to seem natural). Language moves from colloquial ('mob/ tucker/ lingo/ poor bugger') to literary and artificial (the use of the past tense in 'Mogwoi'; the injection of 'please don't disturb' into mention of a sacred waterhole; the carefully shaped sentence about the 'cheerful hunters' — pp.18,30 — etc.).

To me, although they are not unknown amongst Aboriginal writers, these infelicities of style and form indicate the possibility that we should not unquestioningly accept B. Wongar's *bona fides* as a guide to Aboriginal culture. Certainly sentimentality is a common literary tool for people who have been listening to and composing Country and Western songs for years, and it is a common device for appealing to the sympathies of an audience you wish to convert to your cause. Jim Gale

observes that a good proportion of Aboriginal stories are directed at a white readership as a call for recognition of black Australians as fellow human beings. He notes, too, that many of the stories are written in the first person, and that standard English is the norm for literary expression, with occasional experiments in Aboriginal English in dialogue. These stories also often incorporate didacticism as something taken in with the retention of ties to the oral mythic tradition.⁹

My feeling, though, is that we have here a writer who is using these techniques in the confidence (sometimes mistaken) that he is master of the language and craft. This is unusual — perhaps unique — amongst Aboriginal writers to date. It is not, of course, impossible that such an accomplished writer should emerge, but the first-person narrative seems like a conscious ploy to distance the narrator from the writer in order to confer greater authenticity on the situation than it might otherwise have. The difference in language keys is not the uncertain experiment of a new or partly-schooled writer trying out English as a creative medium, and the satire is not born of a spontaneous passion, while the metamorphoses possibly are more in keeping with Ovid and Kafka than with Dreamtime myths.

What I am claiming here is that the simple authenticity of the Aboriginal short story is what is lacking in the less successful sections of Wongar's collection — that its very faults reveal its European leanings. The 'blackfellow' makes better jokes, anyway, than the heavy-handed and unnecessary satire of the acronym CHEAT: 'Consortium of Homage Corporation, Exploration International, Alumina Conglomerate and Transcontinental Mining (fictional)' (p.12 footnote). The satire on do-gooders generally and the inappropriate jibe at Amnesty International (pp.74,76) argue a white mind guiding Wongar's pen which fanciful tales of a half-caste raised in Europe and reintegrated into his mother's tribe after at least fifteen years do nothing to explain.¹⁰ A colleague of Paton's, now a professor of English in Australia, confirms these impressions. Having been shown the manuscript of *The Track to Braigu*, he said:

I thought there was something odd about them. They were written with real concern and social passion by someone who knew the north well — but by a white man.¹¹

Even if the stories about Wongar's tribal identity are true, though, we would still have grounds for suspecting his credentials as spokesman for

traditional culture in the Northern Territory. It is not impossible that a writer 'pushing a line' becomes wrongheaded or limited in his view of the total range of issues. The key in this instance seems to be the cumulative effect of Wongar's stories. Jim Gale hears them sounding an occasional positive note, and cites the endings of 'Mogo the Crocodile man' and 'The Tracker' as proof.¹² To my mind (though I would like it not to be so) there is a relentlessly bleak vision in all of these stories, indicated by the succession of images of retreat and entrapment: islands, caves, cell cages, dugouts and sewerpipes. The tracker is indeed leading three evil whites to their doom, but, though he himself could presumably do the same as the young man he is tracking (to whom he had taught the skills of survival), he lacks the same will to escape and looks forward to his own death. The woman in 'Mogo' concludes her futile quest for medical help for her white husband:

He will be back. When he comes to life again he could be a bird... no, he will be a crocodile, swim quickly out of the out of this muck and swim over the sea to one of the islands — no harm will ever come to him there.

Galba, the dog, does not howl any longer; he has come closer to me and leans his head on my arm. We have to beat our way across the river and find some Kakadu country left somewhere — not big, but enough to make a campfire, cook *gangari* on hot ash and rest. (p.91)

The burden of the whole story, and of others such as 'The Miringu', is that such a spot is no longer to be found. The resurrected man has no human renewal in this world; everyone is reborn as animal, star, or tree. Trees are cut down (p.15); birds find no drinkable water and only burning hot discarded caterpillar tracks on which to rest (p.38). Those spirits that do return to earth in the stories do so only to lead people back to Bralgu; the folk remaining on earth are already spirits (*birimbir*) waiting for death and seeking the only inviolable place they know of:

Whatever might and power they have, these ships will never reach Bralgu; and tonight, as it has always happened since the first *birimbir* came to this country, the morning star will rise in the sky to bring me word of my ancestors. (p.76)

The track to Bralgu, for *Birimbir* (or *Banumbir* — 'morning star') Wongar, is one-way. Alan Paton, while he may have missed the possibility of Wongar's being a fake, has accurately reflected the tone of the stories in writing a Foreword that looks to the past and the 'strange beauty of a

dying world' (p.9), and the inexorable vision of Charles Darwin — 'Wherever the white men trod, death pursued the Aborigines' — provides an appropriate epigraph. For the outlook of these tales is negative, retrospective and unidirectional. Despite their moral call to arms, they are for all the world like a restatement of the opinions of the nineteenth century summed up in Mary Gilmore's poem 'The Last of his Tribe', or in the words of Henry Lawson:

The American Indian, the African and South Sea savage, and the aboriginals of Australia will soon in the course of civilisation become extinct, and so relieve the preachers of universal brotherhood of all anxiety on their account.¹³

Someone called B. Wongar has sailed a ship to Bralgu and plundered its mythic powers of regeneration, leaving a distorted and lifeless picture of an ancestral museum culture. This is particularly unfortunate, considering the book's valuable social and cultural insights and its seemingly convincing use of traditional mythology. Admittedly, tragic vision seems justified in the circumstances he depicts, and it is no doubt shared by the human wreckage of black-white encounters.

As the Caribbean novelist, Wilson Harris, and Wole Soyinka the West African writer have shown us, however, myth can be a radical force for cultural renewal because no culture — traditional or modern — is ever static, and oppressed minorities have a subtle contribution to make to the dominant society in a hidden dialogue out of which new composite and dynamic identities can be forged to counter a history of fragmentation and violence.¹⁴

Contact was never a single tribe's plunging into a social void from parasitism on a single cattle station or town. It was a complex and fluctuating political and cultural interplay between settled semi-'civilised' groups, their relations back in camp, *Myall* blacks from the bush claiming kinship to cash in on new goods and experiences, whites surviving parasitically upon cheap labour and the hunting skills of the blacks, black workers moving from station to station in accordance with tribal migration patterns and their perceptions of the relative merits of various bosses, and a growing component of mixed-race and detribalised youth who, while losing some values, replaced them with others (usually the less desirable characteristics of western life shaped by their limited social horizons). To quote Stanner:

The pathetic fallacy has much corrupted our understanding of this process. Our thinking is far too affected by the cases where violent secondary causes — gross neglect, epidemic disease, extreme malnutrition, punitive expeditions, and the like — in some measure, wiped out whole peoples or left wretched groups of survivors. So strong are these paradigms of sentiment that we project them even onto large surviving groups of Aborigines not now meeting those extremes. We fail to grasp the *scat* for life which animates them because we did not see it in those who died so miserably. (Stanner, pp.47-48)

The important thing about the stories is their contemporaneity: they all postdate large-scale bauxite and uranium mining in Australia and it seems that most of them were written after the Darwin Cyclone of late 1974, celebrated in the tale 'Jambawal the Thunder Man'. The two major elements in these stories, then, is that they show the atrocities of racial, social and cultural conflict are still with us and that they ignore, at the same time, — even implicitly deny the possibility of — the expressions of Aboriginal self-assertion increasingly manifest in events of the last decade.

Jim Gale discusses Aboriginal short stories in the context of Third World movements. No self-respecting civil-rights cum black pride worker these days would write stories like Wongar's. Protest stories have their place at the beginnings of liberation movements; they are now obsolete in terms of the progress made in Aboriginal self-determination. Problems still exist, to be sure, but the lone black stockman awaiting the willy-willy on Gurund Downs has apparently not heard of the Gurindji co-operative cattle station and their settlements run by their own leaders after they walked out on Wave Hill. This series of actions over wages and living conditions and rights to own land goes back at least to the Victoria Downs walkout in 1966 and with many other factors in operation since, has produced the Government-backed move to resettle tribal homelands.¹⁹

The prisoner on the verge of extinction in 'Buwad the fly' comes from the Larrakeah tribe, originally from around the city of Darwin. Berndt claimed they were almost extinct as a group in the sixties, but recently there have been land rights claims to areas of Darwin by people identifying themselves with this tribe. One of the things that has occurred in the last ten years, too, is the redefinition by the blacks themselves of who is and who isn't an Aborigine. Whereas once there was suspicion between tribes and scorn between full-blood initiated folk and the usually more vocal urban mixed-blood, all now are much more united under the

banner of 'black Australians' such that there are now indignant counter-claims to the recently popularised white breast-beating over the killing-off of the native population of Tasmania. This is seen by the mixed-bloods remaining (who see themselves as black) as a plot to deny them their rights.

Wongar is blind to this two-way system. His dispossessed northern tribes in only one case show any sign of having benefited from the white presence (when the mining company and their royalties are used by grandstanding church officials to build a native 'John Flynn memorial' cathedral for an international showpiece). His duped people are not permitted to see beyond their moribund plight to the fact that some tribes are now millionaires several times over and are governing their communal affairs very cannily indeed. In fact, the full-blood population of the Northern Territory has almost doubled in ten years and from a low of 50,000 full-blood or traditional Aborigines in 1964, there are now in excess of 50,000.¹⁴ Such an increase is matched by a growing significant presence of Aboriginal culture in film, dance, music and literature.¹⁵

Bralgu is not a one-way ticket for isolated and despairing victims. Myth cites several cases of humans who went there and returned, bringing knowledge to mankind and, as Wongar admits, the culture-heroes and ancestors do come back from time to time as guides for the living.¹⁶ Despite appearances, the past has not been static and isolated — Aborigines are not living fossils! Berndt & Berndt cite legends of contact with various cultures from outside Australia.¹⁷ Songs and dances have incorporated new experiences such as the coming of trains, the Chinese, and the Afghans with their camels (which were taken over as a means of transport by the Aborigine).¹⁸ Rituals, while they have been watered down through contact, have also been promoted by the mobility afforded dancers and the officiating at circumcision ceremonies by cars, trucks and chartered aircraft.¹⁹ The hybrid Coranderrk group of early Victoria (an extremely prosperous and serious-minded people almost completely Europeanised) which, like several other groups in the nineteenth century, gave the lie to the idea that the black was incapable of learning white ways, retained its native decision-making processes and customs, and was able to adapt tribal marriage custom by freeing young women to choose their own husbands while preserving the ban on marriage within clan and other traditional proscriptions.²⁰ The ritual attaching to the All-Father cult in Central Australia went into a decline before and during World War II but was creatively revived as an All-Mother ritual afterwards. Such adaptability is suggested by Wongar's own use of imagery to

link the ancient and modern (surveyor pegs are *Marain* poles (p.56); helicopter blades spin noisily 'like a Bull-roarer' (p.56) and planes flit past 'flashing like spears' (p.21)) but he never realizes the possibilities inherent in this.

The Dreaming, or Dreamtime, is admittedly an essentially conservative and fragile concept, relying for its survival on social stability:

The initiates, the myths, rites and sacred sites are the links, but desecrate and neglect the sites, break the succession of initiates, forget the myths and omit the rites, and the life which comes from the dreamtime can no longer be obtained. As a result the very existence of man is in jeopardy and the mere thought of this fills the surviving elders with a feeling of futility, while the new generation has neither an anchor in the past, a source of strength in the present, nor a sense of direction for the future. (Elkin, p.233)

But the Dreamtime is not and never was a museum culture. It was original time, present time and future time rolled into one — *sacred time* as Mircea Eliade defines it.²² The Dreamtime myths can be an active animating principle.

This concept is at times suggested in *The Track to Bradbu*, and the stories do to some extent illustrate the importance of the fact that

Aborigines, though subdued by heavy-handed Western dominance, have at least in one tiny section remained masters of their life. Admittedly it is a narrow section and it is a mental one not directly observable in social life. Trivial as it may seem, this reserve is vital. On this basis, Aborigines do not just float helplessly on the tide of change but on their own terms, they meaningfully and significantly adjust. They retain, at least intellectually, the upper hand. They identify; they are not just identified.²³

The final words of the antester-woman contain a suggestion of this:

It is far better to close the eyes; to pretend that you have crawled under a log in the bush and that around you rushes the sound of the wind caught in a hollow tree. Even if a dingo should come to sniff and roll you to the nearest billabong, it will be the end of the life you have been born for, and not one forced on you. (p.68)

To do complete justice to the complexity of culture contact and the resilience of Aboriginal culture, however, Wongar needs to take to heart the words of A.P. Elkin: '...mythology is not just a matter of words or records, but of action and life,...myth is life-giving' (p.244).

Because he fails to do so, we can suspect that the writer and his stories fall within the critical and cautiously prophetic gaze of W.E.H. Stanner, assessing the change of heart of Australian society of the late sixties

towards things Aboriginal:

Then there is the remarkable market for all things Aboriginal. Their art, music, dancing and articles of handicraft have been given a new value by an institution that does not deal in sentiment. The demand for the spoken or the written word about the Aborigines, or the film in any form, is insatiable. The old books have become collector's treasures. But the market wants only traditional things. It smacks of a romantic cult of the past, a cult that could end as rapidly and as strangely as it began. Exactly where the market came from I do not know, but I question whether we would be right in reading from the fact of its existence to a proof of any deep-seated change of heart or mind towards the living Aborigines. I see it rather as the sign of an affluent society enjoying the afterglow of an imagined past and as a reaching out for symbols and values that are not authentically its own but will do because it has none of its own that are equivalent. But for all that the market may turn out to be one of the indirect, and therefore the more permanent, forces making for an appreciation of the authenticity of the Aboriginal past and of their complications of life in the present. (Stanner, pp.225-6)

Fortunately his predictions are being exceeded and the Wongar stories are but one of the results of this. They have their limitations as we have seen, and these, as Robert Drewe has so confidently claimed, are the result of their having been written for a white audience by a European migrant to Australia.

No doubt his position as a migrant has given him special insights into the life of Aborigines, just as the ironies of his unsuccessful battles to break into the Anglo-Saxon literary circles of Australia under his own name have probably added emotional fuel to the abrasive tragic vision in *The Track to Bralgu*. One wonders whether he is as conscious of the ironies attending the success of his *alter ego*, which is equally socially and politically based.

A clear product of the sixties and seventies, the Wongar stories have been acclaimed because the curtain had already been raised on the stage of Aboriginal writing. In white literature, it was the time of Xavier Herbert's release of the long-awaited *Poor Fellow my Country*. Publishers, academics, Aborigines and the liberal middle-class reading public (as well as leftist intellectuals in such places as Paris and Belgrade) all looked forward to the emergence of the James Baldwin of black Australia. They wanted Wongar to be real, and in that climate reviewers like Tom Keneally were able to overlook the kinds of problems in the stories I have set out above. Readers needed an explanation of 'the black mind' and anticipated that when it came, it would be expressed in terms of spirituality, love of the land and the palpability of the Dreamtime. Whites accepted the criticism of mining as a matter of course, finding in

the stories a handy focus for their bourgeois collective guilt and a confirmation for the trendier souls of their own sense of spiritual loss (having no Bralgu or ancestors of their own) and their inability to reconcile ecology and social welfare with a recession in a materialist economy reliant upon the overseas exploitation of Australian natural resources. The conservatives most likely read *Bralgu* with glee, because it spoke to them of their deepest suspicions about 'commie boong ratbags' and no-hoper flotsam, incapable of either appreciating or benefiting from the profits and virtues of free enterprise.

So Wongar *does* matter, because his tales open to the world a window onto a little-known culture with exotic beliefs such as people changing into animals. This is a dangerous task to perform at the best of times, and when it is attempted by an author who is neither who nor what he appears to be, it is the more hazardous. His identity, even though it must to some extent determine his credibility, matters less, however, than his social vision as revealed through the stories. Wongar matters because the cultural lessons he proffers are, at base, quite different to those he and the publishers would have us learn, and opposed to what black Australians have been teaching themselves and the world over the last twenty years.

The stories, as we have seen, do much that has not been done previously, but we must look forward to the emergence of a truly revolutionary writer who will give Aborigines a place in the modern world: in myth, in the arts and in real life.

NOTES

1. Wongar's stories have appeared in a number of places. The main source is the collection, *The Track to Bralgu*, London: Jonathan Cape/ Boston: Little, Brown, 1978. References here are to the paperback edition (London: Pan/Picador, 1980). The *Bulletin* Literary Supplement also includes four tales, and 'Balanja, the Cockatoo' appears in *South Pacific Stories*, (G. Tiffin, ed.) Brisbane: S.P.A.C.L.A.L.S., 1980, pp.70-78.
2. Robert Drewe, 'Solved: The Great B. Wongar Mystery', *The Bulletin*, (Literary Supplement) 21 April 1981, pp.2-5.
3. W.E.H. Stanner, *White Man got no Dreaming*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979, p.25. All further references to this work will be included in the text.
4. G.H. & R.M. Berndt, *The World of the First Australians*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964, p.416. The *dua* moiety have the island of Bralgu as their territory. Several writers attest to the importance of social ties: 'In Aboriginal Australia,

- kinship is the articulating force for all social interaction....' (Berndt & Berndt, p.51). All further references to this work will be included in the text.
5. Berndt & Berndt, p.416.
 6. Berndt & Berndt, *op. cit.*; A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* (revised fifth edition), Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1979.
 7. *The Bulletin*, *op. cit.*, p.4.
 8. *National Trachoma and Eye Health Program*, Sydney: Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists, 1980; various newspaper reports, e.g. *The Age*, 11 August 1981, p.12.
 9. Jim Gale, 'The Aboriginal Short Story viewed from the Third World Perspective', paper presented at the CERNLE/SPACLAIS conference on South Pacific Fiction, Flinders University, April 1979, revised typescript 1980.
 10. *The Bulletin*, *op. cit.*, several references.
 11. *Ibid.* (Derek Marsh), p.4.
 12. Jim Gale, *op. cit.*, p.12.
 13. 'The New Religion' in Henry Lawson (Brian Kiernan, ed.), St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976, pp. 1980, p.82.
 14. See for example, Harris's *Sleepers of Roraima* and *Age of the Rainmakers* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970, 1971) in which the creative potential of minority Amerindian cultures is explored, and Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (London: Heinemann, 1965) where traditional West African myth blends with western cultural patterns.
 15. Scanner, p.231. Many of these developments are discussed in detail in R.M. Berndt's edition of conference papers, *Aborigines and Change: Australia in the Seventies*, Canberra: Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, 1977. The constant theme of these papers is the tenacity with which Aborigines have retained control over a measure of their own lives and how they are now seizing opportunities to create their own future according to the continuous traditional modes of thought and lifestyle adapted to modern circumstances.
 16. Elkin, *op. cit.*, pp.564-5.
 17. One thinks of Jimmy Blacksmith, *The Last Wave*, *Storm Boy*, *Walkabout*, and *Manguninnie*. Films and plays have been produced by black Australians and the writing of verse continues. A growing number of white writers are aware of and using traditional forms and stories in creative ways (for example, Les Murray and Patricia Wrightson).
 18. Berndt & Berndt, pp.409-420, mention Ngurunderi (S.A.), Jalngura (N.E. Arnhem). Scanner cites the myth of the good father who, dying at the hands of his evil son, gives fire to humanity. This is but one example of a myth with the capacity for suggesting regeneration.
 19. Berndt & Berndt, pp.8-9. Weaving, stone houses, pottery and tamarind trees are mentioned in songs referring to Bajau and Makassar seafarers who occasionally settled on the north coast of Australia.
 20. Berndt & Berndt, p.325.
 21. Wallace in Berndt (ed.), *Aborigines and Change*, *op. cit.*, pp.77,80.
 22. Scanner, p.308.
 23. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, London: Collins/Pontana, 1968.
 24. Kolig in *Aborigines and Change*, p.36.

Agnes Sam

'WHAT PASSING BELLS'...*

The boy galloped.
Small, dark and wiry, he galloped.
On the pavement
To the corner
A wide arc
Down to his father
Back again.
Galloping furiously.
Elbows flapping
Tongue clucking
In the sunshine
To the corner
Down to his father
Back again.
Moving rhythmically.
His rhythm infectious.
The distance decreasing as his father neared the intersection.
They held hands and waited.

Once across he galloped ahead —

ya can't come with

ya can't come with

Then turned the corner.

The little girl disentangled her fingers.
Her expression anxious she glanced up at the man for approval before
she dashed after the boy
Her hair and her short skirt billowing around her.

The man followed unhurriedly
Now with a hand clasped around each ankle of the boy straddling his
shoulders.

We're going to the park, ja! ja!
We're going to the park, ja! ja!
Ya can't come with
Ya can't come with

The boy darted between the heavy brown gates that stood slightly ajar.
She hared after him.

The boy galloped
Looking back frequently
Laughing at her
On the narrow path crammed with little pebbles winding between the
areas of grass.
She stumbled after him
Crying out
Unable to catch up with him
On the narrow path bordered by two rows of even-sized white-washed
stones.

They crunched to a halt.

Is it our turn?
She shouted above the noise of children playing.
Wait!
He sounded adult.

They stepped forward warily
Onto the grass
Lush and green
Neatly kept with a precise uniformity
And meticulously
Weeded
From the clumps of flowers growing tall and stately on its borders.

Is it our turn?
She shrilled impatiently
Her attention fixed on brightly painted climbing frames
Shaped like space-ships and spiders

Swings, see-saws and slides alive with shrieking children.

Together they stepped

Wide-eyed

Up to the circle of short, stout poles that seemed to grow from the ground

And stood at the edging

Of thick, white rope that linked the poles to each other

Setting the play area apart from the park.

Come on!

She urged crossly tugging insistently at his wrist.

Wait!

He pulled back.

He was equally annoyed.

His eyes flashed from one end of the play area to the other.

A park attendant in navy-blue uniform walked by.

He wagged a playful finger at them.

They edged towards each other.

Her voice dropped to a disappointed whisper.

Isn't it our turn?

The boy put his finger to his lips:

Shh!

As the attendant marched out of sight he sprang to life.

Wowee! Look at 'em go!

I'm tired!

She announced flatly and turned away

Her cheeks puffed out sulkily.

He grabbed her arm,

He's gonna be sick! Loooooooooooooook! On the roundabout!

She shook herself free,

I wanna go to Daddy.

What did I tell ya?

He shrieked.

Waaah! He's getting sick! What did I tell ya?

I'm tired

She sighed.

Then she began kicking the pebbles onto the grass at his feet
Pouting her lips sullenly
With each movement she made.

Then go back to Daddy
He retorted over his shoulder,
This is great, just great. Hey! Hey! What's happening? Why all the
screaming? Sissy!
He pointed sharply to a boy climbing backwards down the slide
Look at the great big sissy! Waah la!
Come with
She pleaded.
He ignored her.
His attention was elsewhere.

Old men and women all dressed in white clustered onto the green grass
on the other side of the pebbled path.

She placed herself squarely in front of him, moving her head with each
movement of his, so that she continually blocked his view.

He sighed heavily
Now what?
Did you have a turn?
They turned simultaneously towards the smart tap
Of wood on wood
Her question forgotten as the old men and women commenced their
game of bowls.

Ooooh.....look at 'em go. Swings are best, I tell ya. I love swings
best of all.
Swings make me sick!
And saying this she quickly turned her back on the play area
Lifted her short skirt with a flourish
And pushed out her bottom with an emphatic —
So there!

I can go higher than that! Higher! Higher!
He challenged with his hands cupped around his mouth.

A man walked along the path, formed his grease-proof bag into a hard
ball and aimed it at a 'Keep-Your-City-Clean' litterbin.

Did you go higher than that?
 She asked him sweetly.
 Hey? Did you? Did you go higher than that?
 He replied with a shriek.
 He's too scared to stand! Waah la!
 Then he began clapping and chanting
 Too scared to stand!
 Too scared to stand!
 Too scared to stand!
 When'll it be our turn?
 Higher! Higher! Higher!
 When is it our turn?
 Stand and swing! Stand! Higher! Higher! I can go higher!
 How long must I wait then?
 There was not much difference in their heights, but he cleverly slanted
 his head so that he appeared to be looking down at her and said with
 exasperation in his voice.
 Dontcha know even?
 He was shouting again
 I can go higher than that! Higher! Higher!
 How long did you wait then?
 She leaned forward tilting her head
 So that she could look into his face.
 But when she saw that she had lost his attention once more
 She angrily clapped her hands to her ears and screamed,
 Daddeeeeee!
 So that the children stopped playing to look at her.
 Agh, pipe down nonkie! When ya gonna grow up, hey?
 The man walked up to them with the boy still straddling his shoulders.
 She moved over to his side and put her hand trustingly in his.
 The boy burst out excitedly.
 Gosh Dad! You sure missed something!
 How many times must I tell you?
 He said, his voice evenly soft
 Dont — watch — them!
 The children skipped away
 We're going to the park
 We're going to the park
 Ya can't come with
 Ya can't come with.....

They raced on to the end of the park
Where it overlooked the lake
Where the two metal frames stood singularly alone
Dangling lengths of rusty chain
From which the wooden seats had been hacked when he had been a
child.

Ya can't come with
Ya can't come with
'Cause you're afraid of the dark. Ja!
Ja!

"What passing bells!" is the opening line from Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'. Agnes Sam's poem which is published in this issue is the prologue to a longer poem.

Stephen Watson

YEARS

I

In those years
I loved the table-land;
I loved, above all,
the mountain skyline
of my city, Cape Town,
and the pines
like ancient sentinels
along its western salient;
I came alive, if at all,
when I looked to the mountain,

when its African gentian
condensed into darkness
smooth as a dune at evening,
when its horizon withdrew
from the great, drawn sky,
and it was once more
the sole centre of a city
whose life, like mine,
knew none.

Siesta years:
pines in the heat
wind always ploughing
the raw blue salt water,
the white cloud blowing
down the forehead
of the mountain...
and the silence
of the great, vacant
skies of those years,
child years,
in the amphitheatre
of southernmost Africa,
in an emptiness already
there like an enemy,
in the homes
unhousing all memory...

The homes
of my kind,
the white suburbs
like coastal resorts
in their off-season air
of colonial decay,
of collapsed deck-chairs,
rain-sodden strands
and trespassing dogs;
the home of days
dry as tea-leaves,
of nights like wash-
lines of wet socks;

a home prefiguring
the further years,
and a dry grief drying
as it tried
for the fertility of tears.

II

Rust in the sand
around a railway line,
sand threshed to dust
across a metalled road;
afternoons of wind, -
kiln heat, homesickness;
landscapes of gravel,
khaki hectares, wattle,
gums frayed, men dwarfed
by mountains like sheet metal
and their own midget cries.

Years
rootless as this wind
amidst its foot-loose dust;
the land collapsing
till it had nothing left
to collapse into;
when all seemed falling
and had nothing left
to fall into;
of dust falling
through thin sky,
of thin lives falling
through the dust,
till time and again
nothing human remained,
only the mountain,
unbudgeable, bald, blank,
in its immobile blackening
in the heat-waves of the heat.

And no more
the orange-skin grain
of the African light,
but only its shadow,
ochre earth like old blood;
no longer the hinterland,
innocent, sheep-coloured;
no longer the sun
of adolescent Cape summers,
but the light, wind-blown,
broken to stone on the Island.

III

Years of repression
upon years of rebellion;
years of rebellion
upon years of repression...

Time of contradictions:
of servility in the well-manured suburbs
where the bloated hungered for ideas of
the soul;

of clamour in the locations
where their servants hungered for food;
in which, as before,
half-caste women went bearing
tin cans of cold water to shacks of tin
scrap;

in which, as before,
middle class matriarchs went burdened
in the hysterical styles of their
boredom;

in which, as always,
the white régime dispensed
dispensations
like a pharmacist, prospering and prodigal,
in the heavenly suburbs of the incurably
senile.

And I saw in all this,
in the grief of black women, scarcely able
to breathe,
in a woman's ankles so utterly collapsed —
saw in each image a premonition of war;
sought life and found death,
only these fragments, then the fragments
of fragments;
the pine-lands burnt out, the sun like
a stake,
living corpses bloated on beer and fat meat,
and lean brains grown loveless and hungry
for blood.

IV

Those were years
in which murder was often called
a 'strategic intercession',
in which rape was glossed as
a 'separate development'
in which history was called God, and god was called
History,
and no-one knew what to call man;
and many preferred silence,
the vegetal tongue of Cape autumn wind,
the symmetry of a sheltered pine;
preferred, with no shame,
the flint language of the starlight,
the eternal salt throat of the seas,
to that barbarous and murderous Babel
of men.

And the silence
spread everywhere, marooned like the heat,
like stones asleep on their shadows, and the
skylines asleep;
while the same heated passions produced
their hot air

like the massed keening of cats on heat;
while others uttered their cry till they
did not know why,
spoke on and on of a fear, and art advertized
its despair
at the helplessness of humanism
and the pointlessness of poetry.

Y

Years
lived in the sun
as if under a stone;
of lie upon lie
quickenning the dead,
of life upon life
forfeiting its head,
and always the solitude
which was powerless,
which was prideless,
painful and preferable...

Those years,
years of my youth,
that once came alive
in the futile memory
of that futile love,
of the mountain blue
in each Cape darkfall,
I would forsake forever;
those were the years
which also are *these*,
now dead beyond memory,
beyond meaning,
dead in me forever,
these years
which are not ended.

1990-1991

The Comic Theatre of Stephen Black in South Africa



Stephen Black (dramatist), 1880-1931.

Stephen Black's comic theatre has vanished from contemporary South Africa as effectively as its tangible appurtenances: the elaborate Edwardian theatre buildings, the palimpsests of improvised scripts, the photos and other documents, his living performers and even its audiences. There are cultural-historical reasons for this. Time passes; ways of entertainment die; aspirations change. But Black, a master entrepreneur of the colonial heyday, should not have been so forgotten.

Firstly, his career. Whereas most careers in South African show business before 1960 (i.e. before Athol Fugard) were scattered and fragmentary, or by-products of careers in other fields of literature (C. Louis Leipoldt, H.I.E. Dhlomo and Alan Paton are examples), Black's main activity as a writer was for the stage. Between 1908 and 1917, and then in 1928 and 1929, he wrote and produced well over a dozen scripts. Although he also wrote three novels and free-lanced as an article-writer in between theatre seasons, and lived as the editor of independent 'alternative' scandal-sheets in 1917-18 and from 1929 to his death, his main mode of making a living was in theatre — he was for over two decades South Africa's only actor-manager, very widely held to be the 'first South African dramatist' and a man who had an immense popular following. His two favourite scripts, *Love and the Hyphen* and *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, were performed in repertory more than 600 times apiece.¹ To give an indication of the drawing power of Black's theatre, *Love and the Hyphen* has played to an estimated 30,000 patrons by its 20th performance,² and in the years to come the various Black companies would carry it and other Black plays far and wide to many of the railway-connected centres of the South Africa and Rhodesia of his day. He was hardly an unknown figure in his own time.

Secondly, the nature of Black's theatre. It was a type that put a high premium on topicality, and this was only semi-scriptable. Black wrote satirical comedy, the nearest equivalent of which today is the drawing room comedy of manners, yet his scripts never fossilised into high culture artifacts, as has become the fate of writers who strongly influenced him, like Sheridan and Wilde; it was a point of pride and advertisement with Black that his shows were always up-to-the-minute and spiced with in-references to the doings of the actual day. As a result, it is not only difficult to pin down a completely detailed text of any one show, but impossible to recreate its night-by-night particularity. In gaining relevance and immediacy in a living actor-audience interplay, Black sacrificed the 'universals' of drama writing; rather than high art, Black wrote functional editorial commentary.

Another factor which works against the reconstruction of Black's theatre is its style, which today is but dimly remembered in the oratorical delivery of 'old-fashioned' elocution in school and parish amateur dramas. Black wrote pre-naturalism;³ also, his actors were trained not in straight theatre but in music hall, that is, in the lost styles of burlesque and pantomime, song and dance routines, impersonation and mimicry, and light opera (his progenitors were equally Little Tich, W.C. Fields,

and Gilbert and Sullivan). The productions themselves were typical of the Edwardian mixed bill, which itself was an evolution from the low class variety stages into respectability, rather than a devolution of high class drama. That means, far from starting from any Aristotelian unities of time, place and action, Black started from a wide range of styles and began linking them together into plays that were, at first, little more than the sum of the sketches they tenuously bound together. Purity of style and consistency of technique were not Victorian and Edwardian theatrical norms: today it is difficult to reconstruct the critical atmosphere by which Black's theatre was shaped. From the contemporaneous reviews, however, it is possible to deduce that each Black script quite adequately contained sufficient items on the expected dramatic menu: parody, romance, spectacle and scenery, drama (i.e. melodrama), music (including interludes for large resident pit orchestras), use of physical skills (gymnastics, juggling, balancing acts, chapeaugraphy, etc.), and topical comment. When later in his career Black tried to rarefy his scripts into less varied, more homogeneous structures, the attempts failed to elicit any great critical approval.

Thirdly, since the plays were occasional pieces, it seems unfortunately clear that once the original occasion was no longer a currency for an audience, the play that celebrated it died accordingly. Black was born of the Unification of South Africa, and his first play, *Love and the Hyphen* (1908), specifically celebrates that happening, even though it survived eighteen years beyond Union in endless permutations. His second play, *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, was launched in 1910 to discuss further and measure the implications and promises of that same Union, which, in Black's view of it, was a mandate to the writer to write about all of South Africa's people for all of South Africa's people. By 1929 the very boards upon which Black and his companies had always played were closing to him as the talking movie took over venues which had been open to theatre since the 1890s. When Black himself died in 1931, an impecunious Bohemian without any financial assets other than the rights of his plays, the dynamic of his whole brand of show business died with him.

The disappearance of this period of sustained and inventive play-making poses the critical problem of Stephen Black. It is a problem not unique to South Africa, for research techniques and appropriate methodologies for a study of other than high-class theatrical forms have been developed only recently to deal with similar problems throughout the English-speaking world. In Black's case, the most crucial factor causing this gap in the history of the theatre in South Africa is that he chose not to publish. Perhaps it was no free choice: of the three major

genres of Western literature — poetry, fiction and drama — the last-named is the one that has least frequently been seen through into print. Black himself certainly never prepared final drafts of his plays. Where the possibility of raising money on them from publication was concerned, he converted them into other forms. His long-running play of the diamond fields, *I.D.B.*, for example, was recycled (once he was detached from active play-making during a sojourn of some six years as a farmer in the south of France) into a novel, *The Golden Calf*.⁴ In London in 1914-15 (when he worked as a reporter on *The Daily Mail*) he prepared a silent screenplay entitled *The Yellow Streak* in 33 interiors and 20 exterior scenes, which was never shot, but it was the 'literary version',⁵ a long short story on the same theme of a black Rocky-type boxer, which brought in the money.⁶

The record of Black's plays for theatre and for screen, then, is a haphazard and incomplete one, despite the energetic collection of Blackiana in the South African Library in Cape Town and the Strange Collection of the Johannesburg Public Library. There what we have of Black's theatre is in the form of manuscripts and typescripts, with copious holograph corrections, acquired from his family and various associates over the years since his death. These are what in other circles would be called 'prompt copies', amounting to some ten plays only, some of which are incomplete. Fortunately, the texts of *Love and the Hyphen*, *Helena's Hope*, *Ltd.* and the sequel to the first-mentioned *Van Kalabas does His Bit*,⁷ which comprise a sort of trilogy, are reasonably completely preserved.

The case of the *Love and the Hyphen* text is a curious one. Two almost identical typescripts of the 1908-09 script exist, and by correlating them against the lengthily descriptive reviews and second reviews of the time, a more exact date of performance can be narrowed down to early 1909.⁸ In the Strange Collection, however, there is a third script of *Love and the Hyphen*, dated 1928, which includes the three acts of the earlier version, somewhat restyled, and adds to them a prefatory act, and a post script act in which the action is advanced twenty years, i.e. updated to the time of revival.⁹ These two different versions compared give an index to changes of taste in theatre, changes of political insight in Black, and a general growth of sophistication in his dramaturgy and in his audiences. The additional framing acts of the 1928 version give the older central section resonance and perspective, and result in an implicit historical commentary which is without equal in the day-to-day annals of theatre in South Africa.¹⁰ The sequel, written (confusingly enough) between the original versions and the revised version, carries the action of 1908-09

and some of the characters of that *Love and the Hyphen* into the First World War, the watershed event which produces an early 'stranger to Europe' strain of thought about the colony-motherland relationship in Black's representative types.

The play which is related with these *Love and the Hyphen* variants, but distinct from them, is *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, which is more 'well-made' and which relies to a lesser extent on topical allusions and improvised interpolations. The only extant script of *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* is a very early draft, written long before the first night. Although this copy is marked in holograph with notes about speech dynamics for the part of Samuel Shearer (who appears in only the first, the third and the last of the four acts), there are no notes, diagrams or doodles about entries and exits, blocking or style of gesture, so that one presumes it is merely an early copy used at one of the many private readings Black held in Cape Town in 1909 while the production was in preparation.

In attempting to reconstruct a complete and coherent text of *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, one has to have recourse to the easily recoverable category of secondary texts: reviews, programme notes, publicity hand-outs, articles, surveys and gossip columns, and the memoirs of those who were there, either published or collected orally. Here another part of the problem becomes clear. In his review of a performance of *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, the critic of the *Johannesburg Sunday Times* began thus:

I don't think I ever missed the great and glorious advantages of a Colonial education until the other night, when I went to see *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* I had much the same feeling as when I went to see the French plays at the Royalty Theatre in Dean Street... That is, I had to keep my wits on tenter-hooks and my ears keyed to concert pitch, to find out what it was all about.

I am not a linguist. At the best I speak an indifferent English, so that dialogue carried on in Dutch, in Kaffir and in Yiddish is as Greek to me. This was all the more irritating because the ball of language was being tossed backwards and forwards from all parts of the house, while I, in the solitary grandeur of the O.P. Box, sat unmoved, a melancholy and not to say depressing figure.¹⁴

'Gadabout' goes on to admit himself an 'incompetent critic', which is more than some do at the time, and crystallises the language barriers across which Black found it most successful to work.

The essence of Black's success in play after play, then, was his exploitation of local language resources, which made his plays 'South African' in sound and in texture. Black was not the creator of 'South African' stage dialogue, though; on variety bills in smokers and concerts the impersonation of stock cartoon types had been a regular feature since at

least Andrew Geddes Bain in 1838. But Black was the first to draw impersonation sketches into the structures of full-length performance. One of his star actors, Charles Leonard, a Jewish comedian, had been touring the countryside with one-man shows of imitations of Boers, Britons and Blacks when he was recruited into the first *Low and the Hyphen* company, and his Afrikaner yokel character (Van Kalabas) was incorporated into the script more or less as found. Leonard in turn became the lead in *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, as a Jewish rag and bone trader in the rural areas, metamorphosing act by act into a floater of gold mines, a Randlord and a key social figure of the Parktown set of the 1900s. Other stock characters include the colonial maiden, back from finishing school with a stock of new theories on women and labour (out of Olive Schreiner), the Boer pipe-smoking, stoep-talking patriarch, and Black's own alter ego, the independent journalist, editor and proprietor of his own weekly, waging a battle on behalf of the frontier anti-nomianism of the freedom of the early press against the encroachments of the magnates' newspaper syndicates.

The character which flummoxed the likes of 'Gadabout', however, and which was usually played by Black himself in black-face, was Jeremiah Luke Mbene, the Xhosa who starts as a pliant, gullible farmhand and body servant, and who during the elaborate action is drawn to the urbanising Johannesburg to become a mine worker, a liquor runner, a Nonconformist convert and lay preacher. Mbene's language changes from pigeon Xhosa-English, through fanagalo and officialese, into the unctuous circumlocutions of his Exeter Hall mentors. His pompous habit of indulging in Biblical citation and moral homily, on the telephone in lengthy (and renewably improvised) monologues, gave rise to a new stock character, that of the malapropistic Christianised 'Native' — one which Black used as a satirical mouthpiece for over twenty years. ('Good gracious, Ignatius' is a characteristic exclamation.) It would need a linguist expert in the 1910s and 20s of dominion South Africa to measure the true verbal riches of Black, and none have come forth to date to testify to his polyglot versatility. There is a reason: the shibboleth of purity of diction which pertains in English departments in South African universities ignores the study of the creolisation of local English; it is *The Importance of Being Earnest* that remains in the repertoire, not Stephen Black.

Yet, language issues apart, Black himself derives from and remains squarely in the long tradition of European comedy. *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* is at a substructural level merely another *Much Ado about Nothing*, the



Stephen Black as Jeremiah Luke Mbene in his play *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* — Cape Town, 1910.

issue of morally just rewards is typically expanded into parallel plotting between the love theme and the money theme (here specifically the gold of the Witwatersrand), and tokens like rings and heirlooms act as magical charms of truth (in Black's play a pair of baby veldskoens provides the final revelations). The comedy pattern of the play as an initiation of the young into maturity and, inevitably, marriage remains intact. The options of war and peace are poised throughout, and the magnificently plotted resolution of all dissonance into one final all-inclusive harmony maintains a driving momentum throughout. Laughter en route, too, is achieved by the same old Shakespearean means: discrepancy of awareness between characters, misunderstandings caused by mistaken identity, mistiming of plots accompanied by discoveries and reversals, as doors fling open and slam shut, and so on. Black's comedy technique is utterly orthodox; only its application to the social scene of his times can be considered pioneeringly inventive.

This raises another facet of the problem which, I feel, is crucial to an understanding of why Black is missing on the South African stage today. In comparing his range to Shakespeare's I mean to show that his worldview was similarly all-inclusive. In his twenties during the Second Anglo-Boer War, he lived to see the communications network within the subcontinent expand to include the farthest reaches. Union itself implicated the greater whole (and although the Act of Union excluded 'Native' rights, Black's plays did not). By the Depression of the 1930s that network had collapsed into the beginnings of the more formally segregated society of today. Urban theatres in Black's period of operation were unsegregated, or at least commonly opened their upper circles and galleries to 'non-white' patrons. The crimping effect of proto-apartheid on theatre audiences has not only meant that attendances have been separated out into classes and colours, but that the very notion that the entire range of the society can be portrayed on a stage as normal business has been increasingly lost. The children of apartheid, several generations on, no longer know that the land could have had a sense of being one, and that its theatres could have reflected this spirit as found, in all its completeness.

Now, in September, 1981, I became involved in reviving *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, for the first time since 1929, for production in Johannesburg, presented by the Performing Arts Centre of the University of the Witwatersrand. In the try-outs for this run, held in June in Durban, many strangely moving details about Black's theatre fell into place. It was, for example, the first time in the lives of the student players that they had worked together in a 'multiracial' company (this having become

legal again only eighteen months before). It was also the first time that they, like 'Gadabout', had come upon the linguistic meeting and mixing which Black used. Although all of the players were Johannesburg residents, another first was their encountering the hard fact that, after generations of education in the Transvaal, from the reconstruction days of the 1900s, the public and private schools of the 20s and 30s, the differentiated systems of the 50s and the 'group areas' syllabuses of Bantu Education and the Transvaal Educational Department of the present time, almost no information about the dispossession of the agriculturalist, the advent of taxation, the Battle of Johannesburg between Boer republican and British imperialist, the rise of capital in the city, the enfranchisement of white women and the disenfranchisement of black men, the Land Acts preceding 1913, etc., etc. — all crucial issues in Black's plays — had seeped through to them. For them, coming to an understanding of these issues through the script and in the rehearsal room was, in fact, tantamount to a re-education in their own immediate past. Black's liberal humanist tradition had not had valency in their lives, and had to be recreated step by minute step.

The satirical style of this tradition had to be recreated as well: the bold, confident gestures, the haggling with the audience, the asides that break the fly-on-the-wall detachment of an audience and elicit partisanship and complicity, the shameless pandering to a sense of sentiment and of raucous fun that gives a solidarity to the audience-actor relationship, and the emphasis on intricate plotting which makes the whole theatrical experience a tongue-in-cheek guess-along for all concerned. Black's own technique of playing the game of 'wit and outwit' with an audience, notably in the endlessly multiplying double entendres and (his own stock-in-trade) the translingual pun, all required a performance technique for which there was no precedent in the young drama student's experience.

Sequences like the following needed careful comedy teamwork:

JACOB VAN KNAAP: What you want to see me about?

SAMUEL SHEARER: Well, I heard you suffer from headaches.

KATOO VAN KNAAP: He never got a headache in his life.

SHEARER: Appendicitis... biliousness... ?

JACOB: Jah, I used to have awful pains in my belly —

KATOO: Jacob! You forget your managers. (to Shearer) His English is a little bad, he means his stomach.

JACOB: The doctor said I had a stone inside me.

SHEARER: A stone inside you - how many carats?

HENDRIK VAN KNAAP: He never eats carrots - he eat pumpkins.¹¹

The posed quality of this dialogue, building expectations of a pretension knocked, a misunderstanding going berserk, is allied to another tactic Black employs to satirise the quality and the inner thoughts of South African life. His plays are studded with blatant and multiplying racial insults: almost no line is devoid of rudeness, implied or enunciated. So densely packed with the most ingracious swearing are the plays, that I can only assume that this was another of his strategies: to exorcise racial feelings by indulging in a carnival of racist terminology. No stereotypical slur in a Black play is ever made gratuitously; it is always connected to a moment of revenge, of embarrassment, of outrage, of wheeler-dealing, or of social awkwardness. In other words, use of invective is always a result of social factors clearly illustrated by the situation which causes it.

JACOB: If this Jew come here looking for gold, I shoot him dead.

Enter Goldenstein, Polish Jew aged about 40, dirty, unkempt and bearded. Obviously a smous dealer.

GOLDENSTEIN: Vell meester, meester, vy shall you shpeak like dat about your friends? I only want to do pickiness.

JACOB: Isen you then sick of talking with me - I tell you I won' sell.

GOLDENSTEIN: Five thousand pounds.

KATOO: Won' you give six thousand?

GOLDENSTEIN: I couldn't do it, really, really. Where's my profit?

KATOO: A Jew make a profit from anything.

GOLDENSTEIN (*smiling deprecatingly*): Oy, yoy yoy! I wish I was a Yid then.

(Act One, p. 7)

Disparagement and innuendo uttered across racial categories, then,

was another embarrassment which the student cast of *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* had to face. In contemporary South Africa offending the feelings of other 'racial groups' is in fact illegal, and there have been recent cases of, for example, blacks suing whites successfully for being called 'Kaffirs'. Whether or not expunging the words of racial denigration from the everyday public vocabulary by statute, by censorship and by other means, expunges the racialism they imply is highly questionable; at a guess, I would say that it merely drives such urges underground from plain liberal expression of aggression into the devious subconscious of a racist state. The point here, however, is that the children of apartheid have been born into an age of glorious, ramifying euphemism in which the very words of racial contempt are now taboo, inarticulate. Black's simple antidote to this — making racism sound *funny* — has not been applied on the South African boards for a long time;¹² the near hysterical shrieks of audiences at the Durban try-outs for the revived *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* attest that there are still untapped nervous energies in South Africa yearning to call a spade a spade. In that respect, the effect of *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* has not dated at all.

In conclusion, the problem of the discontinuity in South African culture between the world of theatre of Stephen Black and the present time seems part of a larger problem than any that can be handled by the literary researcher. I have implied many extra-literary motives for why Black should be preferred to be forgotten today. In a society which thrives on its own sense of never changing, of being perpetually the same, any notion that it could ever have been different is in itself undermining.

Also, of course, Black was an English-language dramatist, and an early example of a New Literature figure who was able to import metropolitan theatre norms and customs and exploit them without being dominated by them. The same feat is common to all New Literatures struggling between a sense of derivation and of independence, and virtually a given of any colonial culture, whether in fact or in effect. But what I have suggested are the 'black holes' of English-language culture and its continuity in South Africa are there for other reasons: (a) being once part of a British hegemony which downgraded the products of its own outermost reaches, it never achieved the stability and enshrinement that a place in the metropolitan tradition would have afforded; and (b) being no longer part of the dominant language-culture in South Africa, it is neglected as having had no acknowledgeable part in the shaping of an Afrikaans-only literary history.

The revision of attitudes to the history of theatre in South Africa can

only begin once the ideological base of the present cultural pattern has been reassessed, and theatre as a forum for open debate has been re-invented.

NOTES

1. See D.C. Boonsaier, a critic who indefatigably boomed Black, 'My Playgoing Days: 30 Years in the History of the Cape Town Stage', *The South African Review*, Cape Town (9 March and 24 August, 1923). *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* alone played a hundred times between March and October, 1910.
2. With the Players column by Touchstone (Boonsaier), *The Cape*, Cape Town (15 January, 1909).
3. See his account of British stages on his first visit to London, 'Letters from an Afrikaner Abroad', particularly No 7, *The Cape* (31 December, 1909), reproduced with many other pieces on theatre by Black in *English in Africa*, Grahamstown, Vol. 8, No 2 (September, 1982), pp. 67-90.
4. London: T. Werner Laurie, 1985.
5. Black's own description on the screenplay TS., Strange Collection, Johannesburg Public Library.
6. Published as 'The Mock Champion', *Pearson's Magazine*, London (February, 1915).
7. See my 'The First Night of Stephen Black's *Love and the Hyphen*', *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library*, Cape Town, Vol. 35, No 1 (September, 1980).
8. See my *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (London: Collings, 1979), pp.58-61.
9. See my 'Stephen Black and South African Drama, 1908-1928', *Critical Arts*, Grahamstown, Vol. 2, No 1 (July, 1981).
10. 'The Stage: At His Majesty's', *Sunday Times*, Johannesburg (8 October, 1911). See also 'Stephen Black and Local Writing', Isabel Hofmeyr, Neil Lazarus, Irwin Manolm and Carola Steinberg, *Hamlet through a Haze of Alcohol*, Hon's dissertation (unpublished), Department of English, University of the Witwatersrand 1976, pp.103-112.
11. *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* TS., Strange Collection, Act Two, Scene 2, p.6.
12. An exception is Pieter-Dirk Uys's satire, *Die Van Aardes van Grootsoor*, which uses erate invective to circumnavigate the letter of the law.

Ian Stephen

WAS LIKE

That bird was like one nearer home
but its orange leg and dash were
far removed from muddy shades.
I knew no name to pin it down
so had to think of it and all
familiar foreign things, here
within an arc of aero-stop:
long-grassed ground, potato plot,
barbless fence repaired with
improvising bits of string.
All scheming cultivation in
to scarce green ground but gently
organised. You could progress
along a smiling medium way,
litterless but borderless,
to a playground's fence
made from packing cases
stained with purest orange pink,
more expressive than graffiti;
far removed from muddy shades.

TWO WINGS

I swear I liked this well:
rusting coloured roofs;
piers breaking water
in from crash of seas;
peopled headlands.

But then a turn of neck
across the narrow fuselage.

Glance went through to that
which caused words to stall:
surface or globe,
atmosphere or skies.

So now I doubt
my inward choice
of which way to look
if there was but one.

Sam Maynard

PHOTOGRAPHS

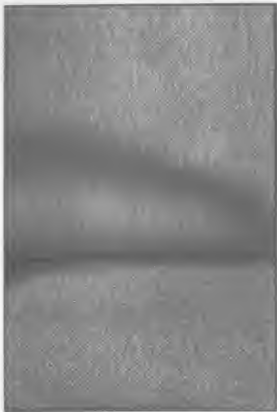


FATHOM OF TWEED

I sit before a moor of tweed;
a narrow gorge and fading ridge
in the treadled folds.

Two ends must be finished but
now I see neither, only
my fathom's reach of arms.

Though I seem to choose this task
there is tyranny in the
needed evenness of weave.



Tony Cosier

THE VERSE MASTER

The verse master, paragon of pedantry,
Neither wived nor daughtered has a heart
Beneath it all and this girl. Though the start
Of each hour with her has her, he

Often overlooks her 'til her straight blue eye
Sparks an awkward moment and her voice
In answer lifts a lilt as choice
As ripple over pebble under clear cool sky

With the sun in it. Sometimes he quotes
A passage so few care about he looks
To where her curled fists prop her chin above her books
And almost smiles. Comforted most certainly, he notes,

Not even wondering how many more times
She will turn up a blonde head to him,
There are links more important than rhythm's,
Bonds more essential than rhyme's.

THE WATER HOLE

The force that drives the sun up drives the sun
To batter the red earth flat, crack its skin
And bake it. Not a bird is flying. Zebras

Gather herd by herd in dust. And stand.
Lions loll about the water hole.
A lion drinks. A lion sits in water.
Zebras gather and stand in herds and watch.
Male and female. Young. Their hides are parched
And red with dust. Some tremble. The smallest totter.
The stallions see all this. But the zebras do not approach.
They do not gather together to attack.
They are afraid of lions. Scorched earth congeals
To four horizons. They endure. They stand and wait
For lions in their time to feed upon.

Brian Walker

GALAHAD'S MONDAY MORNING

Waking unawake,
mind tapping along the floor
like a blind man's cane

Just out of focus
day clicking its Timex tongue
behind the ashtray

Mind massaged
by her gentle inner eyes
through the coffee steam

An Expatriate at Home: Dominica's Elma Napier

In 1958 Jamaican novelist and teacher Sylvia Wynter named Jamaican Ada Quayle as the first West Indian woman novelist.¹ Quayle's novel, *The Mistress*, which Wynter terms 'a competent historical piece', leans heavily upon stereotypic West Indian figures of the profligate planter, the beautiful mulatto and the faithful black servant. Its themes of lust, avarice and cruelty seem designed for the colourful jacket of a popular papercover edition, and, indeed, *The Mistress* appeared in a papercover issue in 1961 (London: Four Square Books). The style of the novel was genially teased by Frank Collymore in his brief *B/M* review of it: '*The Mistress* is written in that clipped staccato style which one might be tempted to call the earnest heming way.' With characteristic generosity, Collymore added that 'much can be forgiven' because 'so well is the story developed, so intense its presentation, so powerful its characterization'.² An aspect of the novel that Collymore did not select for praise but which does merit commendation is its inclusion of such authentic Jamaicania as the John Canoe dances. Unfortunately, the author's knowledge of Jamaican culture is not adequately displayed; the hints of West Indian lore remain isolated as, for example, when Quayle introduces the mysterious chi-ju-ju. She never pauses in her headlong rush to advance the exciting action of Laura Pettigrew's story in order to integrate the folk content into the rather predictable plot of plantation society decadence and deterioration.

It is with a sense of embarrassment that Wynter sets Ada Quayle among contemporary West Indian novelists like George Lamming, Jan Carew, John Hearne, V.S. Naipaul and Sam Selvon. After citing *The Mistress*, Wynter fails to provide further comment upon Quayle's novel while she criticises at length the novels by the male writers. This appears to be an implicit recognition that beyond the novel's existence as a 'first woman novelist's' piece, it really does not meet the quality of, say, *In the Castle of My Skin* or *Voices under the Window*. The implied valuation is

accurate; the error resides in Wynter's attempt to commend a novel primarily on the basis of its chronological appearance without reference to its inherent quality. Furthermore, *The Mistress*, published by MacGibbon & Kee in 1957, is, in fact, not the first novel by a West Indian woman writer. Five years earlier, Dominican-born Phyllis Shand Allfrey published *The Orchid House* in British, French and American editions. The excellence of Allfrey's novel has promoted its inclusion in most bibliographies of contemporary West Indian writing.³ When W.L.W.E guest editors Wendy Keitner and Lois Gottlieb called for papers for their special issue on women writers of the Commonwealth, they received essays on Allfrey from scholars in Canada, Australia and the United States. This demonstration of critical support for Allfrey's long out-of-print novel suggests a consensus regarding its quality. *The Orchid House's* primacy to *The Mistress* is unexceptionable, and Allfrey's West Indian ancestry, which she traces for two hundred years in Dominica, firmly fixes her candidacy as a West Indian woman novelist.

There is also growing recognition of Jean Rhys as a West Indian novelist. The small circle of Rhys followers who were familiar with her short stories and novels of the nineteen-twenties and thirties did not view her as such despite her Dominican birth, her three-generation West Indian heritage, and the strong strains of longing for a West Indian homeland that infiltrate her novels set in England and France. It was the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966 that led to Rhys's rediscovery and to the appraisal of her writing as belonging to some tradition slightly outside the mainstream English novel of manners. Rhys's release of more Dominican material in recent short stories (see, for example, 'The Whistling Bird', *The New Yorker*, 11 September 1978) as well as in *Sleep It Off, Lady* supports her identification as a West Indian writer.⁴ Her position achieved its highest affirmation when Kenneth Ramchand wrote in the April 1978 issue of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*: 'Miss Rhys deserves to be doubly cherished as Elder and Fellow in the house of West Indian fiction.' Although Jean Rhys's first novel, *Quartet*, may not qualify as a West Indian novel because it lacks any West Indian reference, *Voyage in the Dark*, first published in 1934, certainly qualifies for its continual cross-references to a West Indian homeland against which the heroine, Anna Morgan, sets her dislocation in an alien English 'motherland'. Not only does Rhys antedate both Quayle and Allfrey as 'first West Indian woman novelist', she continued to function in the capacity of a West Indian writer throughout her life. Shortly before her death she completed the memoirs of her Dominican childhood and these

recollections of a turn-of-the-century British West Indian island have recently been published in London.

The designation of one writer or another as the 'first' is, however, of limited value. Its importance is more one of literary history than of literary criticism or literary appreciation. It might even be questioned if the qualification of a novelist as 'West Indian' on the basis of his or her place of birth is ultimately fruitful in literary terms. Such classification may satisfy the requirements of a special methodology or of bibliographical compilation, but it is vulnerable to logical grief. It is not unlike trying to assign a piece of fiction to a category of psychological novel, or detective novel, or *bildungsroman* — the classifications cannot be mutually exclusive and the value of the novel as an artistic product can be obfuscated during the exercise of placing it into its most plausible category. A less rigid definition of the West Indian novel (generally one written by a West Indian about West Indians), and the discontinuance of assignments of primacy admit otherwise excluded writers. Under such a dispensation, Africa-born Peter Abrahams, author of *This Island, Now*, can be considered a West Indian novelist as can be Scotland-born Elma Cumming Gibbs Napier.

In their 'Select Bibliography of Women Writers in the Eastern Caribbean', Barbara Comissiong and Marjorie Thorpe, writing from the University of the West Indies in Trinidad, credit Elma Napier as the author of two short stories in 1951 issues of *BIM*. These are 'No Voyage for a Little Barque' in which Napier examines the rum-running which took place between Dominica and its neighbouring French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe following the second world war, and 'Carnival in Martinique' in which she narrates what happens when the servant girl Jeannette dresses for carnival in her mother's traditional creole gown of red silk with its lace petticoat and turbaned kerchief. A more exhaustive search of *BIM* uncovers in addition Napier's 'Morning by the Mediterranean' (II, 42), 'The Road' (IV, 16), 'On the Road to Antioch' (X, 41), 'O, Call Back Yesterday' (XI, 43), and the continuation of 'O, Call Back Yesterday' (XI, 44). These contributions to the Barbadian little journal are supplemented by the following family contributions: Beth Honychurch's 'Barter' (II, 8), E.L. Honychurch's 'Walking' (II, 5), Ellice Honychurch's 'Cardboard Skeleton' (III, 9) and E. Gomier's 'Pages from a Diary'.¹ In addition, Napier's grandson's pen and ink drawing 'Dancing Bonaire: Dominica' forms the frontispiece to *BIM*'s volume XIII, 50, and Lennox Honychurch continues in the Dominican literary tradition with his publication in 1975 of *The*

Dominica Story: A History of the Island. Published by the Letchworth Press in Barbados, the volume is dedicated 'In memory of my grandmother Elma Napier whose life shall forever be an inspiration for me' and is prefaced with an excerpt from Phyllis Alfrey's poem, 'Love for an Island'.

The slight sketches which Napier contributed to *BIM* constitute neither her total nor her principal prose. Napier's books appear under two names. Elma Napier is the author of the autobiographical works: *Nothing So Blue* published by The Cayme Press in 1927, *Youth Is A Blunder* published by Jonathan Cape in 1948, and *Winter Is in July*, also published by Jonathan Cape, in 1949. She also published two West Indian novels under the pseudonym of Elizabeth Garner: *Duet in Discord*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937; and *A Flying Fish Whispered*, London: Barker Ltd., 1938. There are several reasons why Napier-Garner's books have slipped through the filter of Commonwealth literature commentary but no single reason seems adequate to explain the obscurity into which her books have fallen. She was not a retiring person who wrote secretly in her Dominican hideaway. On the contrary, she was a highly visible political personage in Dominica where she became in 1940 the first woman on the island and the first woman in the entire British West Indies to serve on the legislature. In *Youth Is a Blunder* she reflects from a position of political involvement upon her apolitical upbringing: 'Brought up so unpolitically, it is rather a joke on the part of Fate that I should happen to have been the first woman elected to any Legislative Council in the West Indies' (158). Not only did she serve after the war as an elected representative for the northeastern district of the island, she 'pioneered Village Boards and co-operative ventures as a means of community growth'.⁶ 'Self-help' is a concept of economic provision still in vogue among Dominicans, and Elma Napier tried to develop the first self-help groups on the island following the end of the Second World War when the island was particularly destitute because trade and agriculture had been disrupted. A small island has a long memory and there are still many recollections exchanged of the wartime sacrifice of Dominica's livestock to feed the overwhelming numbers of fugitive French from the neighbouring islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe who sought asylum from Vichy domination. Later, Elma Napier joined with Lionel Laville to lead a people's protest against diverting the completion of the proposed Transinsular Road. The protest was formulated as a mass petition which was sent to the Secretary for the Colonies and from there it went to the House of Commons. It was largely

a result of Napier's activity that the Transinsular Road was completed in 1956.

Like Elma Napier, Phyllis Allfrey also served her native island politically (Allfrey was the Dominican representative for the West Indian Federation), but her literary achievements were not buried as a consequence. The Commission-Thorpe bibliography awards Allfrey full credit for her poetry and her novel whereas Napier's only documented contribution is the two *BIM* sketches. Perhaps Napier's use of a pseudonym obscured the fact of her authorship; perhaps the lack of an American edition of *A Flying Fish Whispered* occasioned its loss of literary notice; perhaps Napier's original expatriate status led to her rejection by the early compilers of bibliographies of West Indian literature.

Elma Napier's first book, *Nothing So Blue*, was written while she was still seeking a home where she could establish her individual roots. It belongs to a genre of English literature that is long histories, widely represented, but singularly ignored by teachers and critics. *Nothing So Blue* is in the tradition of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey*, William Henry Hudson's *Idle Days in Patagonia*, and Alec Waugh's *Hot Countries*. Collections of travel essays or book-length accounts of the Englishman's adventures abroad date beyond the origins of the novel, but the growth of the novel as a premier genre has eclipsed the art of essay writing, while among the short prose forms, the preference for fiction has replaced the essay by the short story. The recent popular affirmation of prose forms like the biography, diary, and sustained nature sketch may encourage the retrieval of these genres which, like the travel account, have assumed positions of secondary importance. *Nothing So Blue*, dedicated to Elma Napier's second husband, Lennox Napier, is divided into four sections that accommodate the various parts of the world to which Napier's travels took her. 'Les Iles Sous Le Vent' contains multiple sketches of incidents and places in the South Pacific islands of Tahiti, Moorea and Maiao. This is terrain that evokes reflections of Stevenson, and the collection's title is from Stevenson:

For who would gravely set his face
To go to this or t'other place?
There's nothing under Heaven so blue
That's fairly worth the travelling to.

The stylishly-written sketches are the transcriptions of experiences acquired by a voyager who is not travelling as an idle tourist or holiday

seeker, but as one required to travel by the exigencies of earning a living. Exactly why the author and her husband (presumably the narrative 'we') were in the South Pacific is not stated, but there is sufficient information to suggest that they were involved in bottom-level trade agreements. For example, the requirement to sit all day on the verandah of a chief's house in Maiao in almost perfect silence while beset by mosquitoes is associated with negotiating 'the price of copra and the possibility of a cargo'. The second section, 'Indo-Chine', reveals a capacity for gentle satire: the narrator is engaged at length by a French merchant whose mission in Pnom-Penh is to achieve an introduction to the chief priest of the Buddhist monks. The merchant's purpose is not to render homage to a religious leader but to present the 'Chef des Bonzes' with a black silk umbrella manufactured in Lyons. 'If the chief priest uses one of my umbrellas ... the others will do the same. My fortune is made.' 'Queensland' offers an abrupt shift of scene. The background loses any touches of exoticism and acquires instead the gritty quality of the Australian bush where Elma Cumming spent the years of her first marriage to Maurice Gibbs. Gibbs was sent by his family to man an Australian sheep station, and this section of *Nothing So Blue* should be treasured for its insight into the cultural shock Australia represented to young expatriates sent from England, Ireland and Scotland to pioneer landholdings as unlike in climate and topography as anything the United Kingdom could possibly offer. The fifty pages of 'Queensland' could be excerpted as required reading for a course in 'The Expatriate Wife'. 'Backwards and Forwards' picks up miscellaneous assignments. The narrator is glimpsed in Teneriffe, Burma, Rio de Janeiro, traversing the locks of the Panama Canal, in the Solomon Islands, and back to Perth and Melbourne in Australia. She has not yet encountered the fate that was to lead her to her permanent home in Dominica.

One of the sketches appeared in the Australian monthly *Home* prior to publication in the collection, but 'the greater number of these sketches ... appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*'. It is impossible to know how widely read they might have been in their combined periodical and hardcover appearances, but it is interesting that Jean Rhys opens her *Sleep It Off*, *Lady* short story 'The Insect World' by having her protagonist Audrey read a book 'called *Nothing So Blue*. It was set in the tropics.' Audrey's book is described by Rhys in detail and it does not sound at all like Elma Napier's book. Perhaps Rhys used only Napier's title and invented her own details. Or the allusions to Stevenson's poem may represent a literary coincidence. The two women writers who were

to emerge eventually as Dominican novelists never crossed paths on Dominica. Rhys left the island in the nineteen-tens whereas Napier did not arrive until sometime in the thirties.

Precisely when Lennox and Elma Napier arrived in Dominica with their family is unclear. The narrator of Napier's first novel, *Duet in Discord*, alludes to her arrival in Dominica in an interior monologue under circumstances that appear to be at least partially autobiographic. (The narrator is forty-three; Napier was herself in her early or mid-forties when the novel was published in 1937 — the National Union Catalogue lists her birth year as 1892.) Carol says,

But I, who have known myself for forty years in other surroundings, am still amazed at the twist of fortune that has brought me to the desolate rock-bound coast of a West Indian island. I take stock of myself sometimes and wonder if I am quite true and not living in a fantastic dream from which I shall wake to find myself some place where there is other noise than the crash of surf and the humming of little shimmering birds. Of all the white women in the island — there are perhaps fifty — I think that I alone live here because I like it. And 'like' is of all words the most ridiculous with which to express the love that I have for this place, love that has something almost physical about it, so that in moments of pain I have quite literally lain full length and drawn solace from the ground.⁷

Whatever constituted the 'twist of fortune' that impelled the Napiers to Dominica, they evidently embraced the island as home so completely that by the mid-thirties the signature of Lennox P. Napier appears at the bottom of a manifesto for self-government. True to her vision of herself as a basically unpolitical person, Napier wrote her first novel as a totally personal exploration of an unlikely love affair between a middle-aged widow and a twenty-six year old bachelor. The women's liberation movement and female film direction make this sort of plotting familiar today, but it was an unusual construction in the thirties. Doris Lessing has undertaken the same construction in *The Summer Before the Dark*, but even in that novel of 1973, Kate Brown says with a tart accent: 'Popular wisdom claims that this particular class of love affair is the most poignant, tender, poetic, exquisite one there is, altogether the choicest on the menu.' Lessing's novel is billed on its papercover as 'a woman's second chance — an adult odyssey into the perils of freedom'. Forty years earlier, Napier undertook a novelistic exploration of such a second chance. Her novel is more coherent than Lessing's and while both novels evidence a certain 'yeasty' quality, there is a ring of authority throughout *Duet in Discord* that makes Tony and Carol's relationship more credible than Kate Brown and Jeffrey Merton's. Further, there is a sexual honesty

about the earlier novel that almost matches the later's, and the mere fact of its appearance four decades earlier is the more remarkable.

The West Indian setting of *Duet in Discord* does not serve simply as background for the interlude of the mismatched lovers. It continually extends out from and reflects back upon the personality of the narrator. The setting is specifically Dominican rather than generally West Indian and its specificity focuses upon the section of the island where Elma Napier lived. Pointe Baptiste with its views seawards of Marie Galante to the *Iles des Saintes* and inland to *Morne au Diable* and *Morne Diablotin*, the particularity of rocks, vegetation, animal and sea life actually overwhelm the novel to the extent that *Duet in Discord* is more genuinely a record of the author's love affair with an island. Her appropriation of Dominica does not stop with the natural surroundings. It includes the peasant life in the village of Calibishie. Napier's view is not the peasant's, but neither is it the tourist's. It is rather the view of an intelligent and involved woman interacting with both her neighbours and her adopted homeland.

Napier's second Dominican novel is less introspective and in it she expresses a higher level of social concern. Although, again, the central relationship is one between two members of the island's small white community, one an expatriate and the other a creole. Napier's increasing political consciousness invades *A Flying Fish Whispered*. The novel is dedicated to Patricia (one of Mrs Napier's daughters) and it is divided into the two major sections of 'Fever and Flame' and 'Coconuts and a Cattle' with a twenty-page 'Interlude' between the two. The heroine is twenty-nine year old, unmarried Teresa Craddock who lives with her brother Tommy in their family home, *Ca Ira*. The creole name of the Craddock estate suggests the family's flexibility while it contrasts effectively with the harsh sounding name of Neva. Derek Morell's plantation on the 'other side of the island' — the Atlantic Ocean side. Derek Morell and his wife Janet are newcomers to *St Celia* — the fictional name for Dominica. They arrive imbued with the values of the work ethic (Napier pointedly remarks upon their Methodism). By denying their neighbours the traditional privileges of collecting fallen coconuts and beaching fishing boats, the Morells alienate the islanders. Their aim is to succeed financially as planters in an effort to compensate for the impoverishment of their respective childhoods. This aspect of the Morells' motivation is implied rather than explained by Napier who obviously supports the code of neighbourly co-operation and the assistance of the poor by the less poor.

In the first section of the novel, Napier sets up another unlikely love

affair: that of Teresa Craddock and forty year old, married Derek Morell. For the first one hundred and twenty-nine pages, Napier carefully establishes the growth of a love affair between these two dissimilar people. Again, she interweaves with the love story aspects of Dominican and expatriate culture. For example, in criticism of English expatriate behaviour in the West Indies, Napier has a minor character say, 'English women in the West Indies do their own cooking to economize on ingredients. But they keep servants for the sake of being able to write home with pride in their number.'⁶ It is apparent that Napier no longer considered herself a member of the expatriate community by the time she wrote *A Flying Fish Whispered*.

The novel holds a special appeal for readers who know and love Dominica because in it Napier includes small items that can refer only to that island. As an illustration, she features crapauds as Government House dinner fare. Crapauds, called 'mountain chickens' by Dominicans, are large frogs that are considered a delicacy on the island and are reserved for serving on special occasions. With an outstanding descriptive talent Napier incorporates into her story her observations of Dominica's distinctive flora and fauna: the giant gommiers and the mahaut cochon trees, the Sisserou parrot that exists nowhere else in the world, the little agouri, and the ramiers or wood pigeons that are treated as game birds. More important is Napier's record of what she perceives to be social errors. Her emphasis is upon inequalities accorded women and blacks. She protests against the double sexual standard, 'He ... would believe ... that there was one sauce for the goose and another for the gander' and attacks male complacency, '...she did not believe that women quarrelled inevitably about men'. She deplores the assumption that women are not intellectually equipped to serve as jurists, and laments the disfavour into which the suffragist movement had fallen: 'Women — as women — don't die for their rights any more.'

By moving the novel's action to an island with a less favourable racial climate than St Celia's, in 'Interlude' Napier offers a reprieve from the love theme of the novel while demonstrating her racial partisanship. Like Rhys, she expresses a non-sentimental preference for the social behaviour of black people. In *Duet in Discord*, Napier literally and figuratively says 'black is beautiful' whereas in *A Flying Fish Whispered* she goes beyond mere affirmation to a confrontation with the specific injustices inflicted on black people. For example, she denounces the plight of Parham Island's landless peasantry living precariously on estates having thousands of uncultivated acres. She attacks the sugar factory's discrimi-

natory practice of paying to peasants a shilling less for a tonne of cane than it pays to planters. And she examines the meaning of enfranchisement for a peasant people. All these issues of sexual and racial social imbalance are presented with a poise and control that preserve the novel from deteriorating into a polemical tract. In the last one hundred and twenty-nine pages of the novel, Napier adroitly resolves the love interest of Derek Morell and Teresa Craddock with a realisation that their dissimilarities of attitude are too great to serve as a foundation for an abiding relationship despite the sexual attraction the two hold for one another.

Ten years after the publication of *A Flying Fish Whispered*, the first volume of Napier's autobiography appeared. Dated 'Dominica, 1940-5', *Youth Is A Blunder* is dedicated to the children of her daughter Daphne: 'Dedicated to my grandchildren, Antony and Elizabeth Agar.' Part one covers her childhood, the period 1896 to 1906, and part two covers the years 1906 to 1912, or up to her first marriage to Maurice Gibbs, the son of the Honourable Henry Gibbs and the grandson of the first Lord Aldenham. Napier's memoir of her childhood and adolescence is a fascinating chronicle of the Edwardian period in England. Her mother was an American, Florence Josephine Garner, and her father was Sir William Gordon Gordon Cumming, Baronet, who was ostracized in 1891 over the 'Baccarat or Tranby Croft Case'. Sir William had been accused of cheating at cards and the Prince of Wales was subpoenaed as a witness. The Prince's 'hostile evidence' caused the loss of Sir William's case although, according to Napier, 'thousands of people, including his counsel, Sir Edward Clarke, believed him innocent'. Florence Garner married him 'the day after the verdict was given' despite the social scandal resulting from the press coverage of the court case. In 1949, Napier published the continuation of her autobiography, *Winter Is In July*, starting with her twentieth birthday, her marriage to Gibbs, the birth of her first baby through the death of her father to her second marriage and the birth of her fourth child. These are the years during which she lived as an expatriate wife in Australia and it is doubtlessly from this period that the short stories of *Nothing So Blue* were drawn. It is regrettable that these memoirs were not continued in a third volume which would have provided an explanation for her settlement in Dominica with Lennox Napier and her children.

In a lengthy letter to Alec Waugh, Elma Napier discloses that she was at work on a new Dominican book in 1949, but it is unclear whether it was to be another novel or a continuation of the memoirs. Her letter to Waugh expresses appreciation for Waugh's citation in his chapter

'Typical Dominica' in *The Sugar Islands*. Alec Waugh had written:

I was to hear much talk of Dominica during the 1930s. In London and New York, the Dominica legend was taking shape. The expatriate colony was growing. Stephen Hawes, for example, went there, and Elma Napier and John Knapp.... Elma Napier, the daughter of Sir William Gordon Cumming, one of the chief figures of the Tranby Croft baccarat scandal, widely travelled and the authoress of several books, is very much a person in her own right.⁸

Further along in 'Typical Dominica' Waugh elaborated:

A widow now, on the brink of sixty, she has two properties, one on the leeward coast which she has let, the other in the north east corner of the island at Pointe Baptiste. Though she does not work either of her estates, she is a busy woman. There is nothing escapist about her life; not only has she written three or four books there, but she is active in local politics. She serves on the legislative council, as an elected member, a thing that no other woman, white or black, has ever done. There are no proper roads in her district, and it takes her five days to cover it. She takes her obligations very seriously. (100-101)

It was in response to these comments that Napier wrote Waugh from Pointe Baptiste on 30 January 1949:

I cannot begin to tell you how gratified I was to receive this morning your *Sugar Islands*. Thank you very much indeed for a charming present and delightful inscription. I have not yet had time to read more than the Dominica chapter...

How could I be anything but pleased about your version of me? It couldn't be nicer, except that I still have three years to go towards sixty. But advancing years is not one of my troubles and I make no bones about dates. Incidentally, who is Jean Rhys? I must try and read her. None of us have ever heard of her.

Cape is doing my second volume some time this year, to be called *Winter* in in July, and I have been working hard on a West Indian one, *Calibishie Chronicle*. One paragraph of yours I have borrowed with acknowledgments. I hope you don't mind. It is from *Sunlit Caribbean*, about Dominica. Anyway, I am still only on my second draft and I generally do about fourteen. A slow worker.¹⁰

Calibishie Chronicle has never been published and it is possible that the manuscript remains with Napier's descendants in Dominica. If its literary quality meets the standard established in *Duet in Discord* and *A Flying Fish Whispered*, it deserves to be exposed to the light of the West Indian literary day.

In addition to the information Napier's letter to Waugh provides about her biography and her literary activity, it reveals that Jean Rhys's literary achievements were as unrecognized in her native country as they were in England and the United States during the period now referred to as Rhys's 'underground years'. It may be another Elma Napier 'twist of

fortune' that has brought Rhys, the creole writer that no one on Dominica had 'ever heard of', back into public notice while Napier, a once widely-recognized author and political figure,"¹¹ receives credit for only two *BIM* essays.

NOTES

1. Sylvia Wynter, 'Strangers at the Gate', *The Times Colonies Review* (Fourth Quarter, 1958), p. 26.
2. Frank A. Collymore, 'Brief Notices', *BIM*, 7, No 27 (July-Dec. 1958), 185-86.
3. It appears in the following: Ruta Mara Sani, 'Bibliographical Survey of the West Indian Novel' (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 1972); Anthony Bonill, 'Bibliography of West Indian Fiction 1900-1970', *World Literature Written in English*, No 19 (April 1971); Kenneth Ramchand, 'Author Bibliography' and 'Year by Year Bibliography', *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970, 1972, 1974); Barbara Comissiong and Marjorie Thorpe, 'Select Bibliography of Women Writers in the Eastern Caribbean', *WLWE*, 17, No 1 (April 1978).
4. Joseph and Johanna Junci identified Jean Rhys as a West Indian novelist in *Authors and Areas of the West Indies* (Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1970), but no woman writer appears in the Caribbean section of *Modern Commonwealth Literature*, John H. Ferret and Martin Tucker, eds. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977).
5. Reinhard W. Sander identifies E. Gomer as a pseudonym for Ellice Honychurch in the *BIM Bibliography Index* (Kraus Reprint, 1977), p. 42.
6. Lennox Honychurch, *The Dominica Story* (Barbados: Letchworth Press, Ltd., 1975), p. 96. This book is the source of information about Elma Napier's political career.
7. Elizabeth Garner, *Dust in Discord* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937), pp. 8-9.
8. Elizabeth Garner, *A Flying Fish Whispered* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd., 1938), p. 25. This novel is especially difficult to find in the United States. It is not listed in the National Union Catalogue although it is indexed in the British Museum Library Catalogue. In London it can be found both at the British Library and at the Hammesmith Central Library where it is catalogued under the Joint Fiction Reserve.
9. Alec Waugh, *The Sugar Islands* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1949), p. 95. The subsequent reference to this work is to this edition and appears in the text.
10. This letter is in the Alec Waugh collection of Boston University's Twentieth Century Archives.
11. Alec Waugh again invokes Elma Napier in his latest novel, *The Fatal Gift*. In the novel's foreword he says, 'Nor did I see any point in finding a pseudonym for Dominica. The island is unique and this particular story could only have happened there. In Dominica my hero would have met Elma Napier, John Archbold and Stephen Hawes, so I have written about them as I would have done, and indeed have done, in a travelogue. I think this is legitimate in a novel, and I hope the reader will not be confused.'

'When de Saint Go Ma'chin' Home': Sterling Brown's Blueprint for a New Negro Poetry

Perhaps it is fitting in celebrating Sterling Brown's eightieth birthday and career of great achievement to turn once again to his first published poem, 'When de Saints Go Ma'chin' Home'.¹ It is a Big Boy Davis poem — the 'guitar-plunkin' singer of marching saints is Big Boy — and it is the only 'Big Boy' poem specifically dedicated to him.² The dedication reads:

(To Big Boy Davis, Friend.
In Memories of Days Before He Was
Chased Out of Town for Vagrancy.)

Such a dedication has a way of bringing a smile to our lips; so much is afoot here in what is, for Brown, a typically mischievous way. Obviously, Big Boy was a character, a roustabout, a 'terribly unemployed dude' as Toni Morrison would remark. Evidently, however, he was much more than a colourful vagrant in the eyes of some, those folks including Sterling Brown, the author and persona. While Brown appreciates and often reveres the 'characters' in our shops and churches, neighbourhoods and towns, and while he often writes about them, he rarely if ever dedicates poems to them. This poem is dedicated to Big Boy because he was not merely a character but a friend and guide, not merely an entertainer but an artist, and most particularly because he was a singer and hence creator of community even though, in the eyes of the law, he was a man with no visible means of support.

Brown's dedication is therefore in some sense ironic: the town is not necessarily the community — especially as community may be consti-

tuted and defined by shared performances of expressive culture; the law is not necessarily the will of the people; the unemployed and allegedly idle are not necessarily bereft of direction and values and without employment of another kind. It is also a dedication that is sincere. Big Boy's example gave Sterling Brown a clear understanding of how to begin to create a written art which would not only portray or 'call the names' of the folk but also perform the didactic functions of communal expressive culture. Quite to the point, 'When de Saints' does not merely portray Big Boy — any more than Brown's 'Ma Rainey' merely portrays that great singer. Instead, it offers, through its evocation of a communal performance of 'When de Saints' inspired by Big Boy, a blueprint for a new poetry in what we inadequately call the folk manner.

Part I of the poem establishes Big Boy as a redoubtable storyteller and bard; as a figure who is something more than an entertainer. It also makes clear that his concert is a shared, communal, 'folk' event. The first stanza reads as follows:

He'd play, after the bawdy songs and blues,
 After the weary plaints
 Of 'Trouble, Trouble deep down in meek soul',
 Always one song in which he'd lose the rôle
 Of entertainer to the boys. He'd say,
 'My mother's favourite.' And we knew
 That what was coming was his chant of saints;
 'When de saints go ma'chin' home....'
 And that would end his concert for the day.⁵

One notices immediately that the 'we' used throughout is not a gratuitous, editorial 'we'. It is an aggregate or shared 'we' connoting terms like 'neighbours', 'kin', 'listeners', 'audience', and, more abstractly, 'performance group'. It refers to folk who will share in the chant, possibly by being 'saints' to be numbered (as we observe in part II) or by telling or singing of Big Boy in future recreations of 'When de Saints' such as the poem before us.

Like any other audience fully participating in the creation of a shared artistic event, Big Boy's gathering has certain expectations which he, as performance leader, must meet. The phrase '...we knew/ That what was coming was his chant of saints' tells us that the audience expects (and apparently is about to receive) a repetition of an orchestrated performance witnessed before. They don't want something new. The repetition of the old songs, the re-appearance of familiar, anchoring visions, and the reaffirmation of shared values are what they desire and, in some

sense, require.

In this regard, a phrase such as 'my mother's favourite' carries a special weight in that it advances poem and performance alike. As a written phrase, it suggests the generational 'in their song', bound by the repetition within community of song contextualized in performance. But it is also an example of what David Buchan terms 'received diction' — language which has 'accrued a contextual force'.⁴ It is a coded message, a signal: the audience knows that it is to be quiet and respectful — this being the very way in which Big Boy wants it to join in. The glory of Brown's handling of all of this is that he is able to suggest in written art the full extent to which silence in a folk artistic event is voiced.

In short, throughout part I the emphasis is not on whether Big Boy sings 'When de Saints' well but on whether his singing re-creates the conditions in which shared performative events may fittingly close ('And that would end his concert for the day') and thus achieve artistic form. Part I initiates Brown's presentation of Big Boy's vocation — his work for and among the 'kin' in attendance. Every suggestion that he does his work well and has always done so ('Alone with his masterchords, his memories...') refers us back to the charge with which the poem began — that Big Boy is a vagrant — and renders that charge more and more ludicrous.

As suggested before, part II of 'When de Saints' 'calls the names' of some of the folk who'll be marching home. Once again, the communal aspects of Big Boy's performance are accentuated. Deacon Zachary, old Sis Joe, and Elder Peter Johnson are among those named or called, and one cannot help but imagine that Big Boy is weaving into his song — his song so set and familiar and yet so perpetually available for traditional acts of improvisation — the names of figures in the audience before him. These names may not have been in need of the call a year or two ago, but, apparently, they need calling now. We know that Deacon Zachary, Sis Joe, and Elder Peter Johnson are old. Perhaps they are sick as well and their time is nigh. Perhaps others, too, are in hurtful need of hearing their names called — of being listed in that number. The point is that Big Boy understands all of this, and knows what he's supposed to do to better their lot. This is why, when Big Boy calls for quiet, folks don't leave: though silent, they will share in the performance of 'When de Saints'.

As the section develops, we realize that all the 'saints' listed are either elders or children, and that Brown willingly runs the risk of creating 'plantation' stereotypes (Deacon Zachary's 'coal black hair' is full of 'hog-grease', etc.) in order to stress that Big Boy's roster of '...saints — his

friends...' embraces everyday folk.³ In this regard, Stephen Henderson is quite correct to suggest that in this section Brown fashions an 'emblem of folk society'.⁴ But he's up to other things as well, matters which have much to do with his increasingly specific ideas on realism in Afro-American letters. The image of the children amongst the saints is, for example, far more complicated than it initially appears. It is at once an image of youth at play — 'Wid deir skinny legs a-dancin' — and of youth in heaven, in death. They are, in Michael Harper's powerful words, 'brown berries torn away'. While we gain a certain solace from knowing that they are in heaven, we also can't help but wonder about the quality of the world they left behind. The portrait of an elder, Grampa Eli, prompts similar thoughts:

'An' old Grampa Eli
Wid his wrinkled old haid,
A-puzzlin' over summat
He ain' understood,
Intending to ask Peter
Perridin' he ain't skysaid,
'Jes' what mought be de meanin'
Of de moon in blood? ...'

Grampa Eli has good reason to be puzzled. He's a simple man perhaps, but he's not asking a simple question. Since we can assume that he knows something of the folk beliefs associated with the 'blood-burning moon', it seems likely that what he's really asking is why is there fear, violence, hate, murder? What kind of world is this? Why are people that way? The stanza begins with a stereotype, or something close to it, and ends with that type unpacked or torn apart. Whatever it may be, Big Boy's chant is not a minstrel song.

While part II of the poem lists those who will be in that number, parts III and IV suggest who might be left out. Part III generally vilifies white folks — '*Whuffolks ... will have to stay outside/ Being so onery ...*' — but justly asks what Big Boy is to do

With that red brakeman who once let him ride
An empty going home? Or with that kind-faced man
Who paid his songs with board and drink and bed?
Or with the Yankee Cap'n who left a leg
At Vicksburg? ...

His answer has just the right blend of reason and irony:

*...Mought be a place, he said
Mought be another mansion fo' white saints
A smaller one than his'n ... not so gran'*

Part IV asks the even harder question of whether there are black folks who won't make the roster. There's an answer for that as well:

*Sportin' Legs would not be there — nor lucky Sam,
Nor Smitty, nor Hambone, nor Hardrock Gene,
An not too many guntin', cuttin' shiners,
Nor bootleggers to keep his pockets clean.*

To this list 'Sophie wid de sof' smile on her face' is also added; apparently, 'She mought stir trouble, somehow, in dat peaceful place'.

These sections obviously suggest that Big Boy's heaven will be peopled with blacks and whites of a certain kind. For this reason, I think it is fair to say that they are the sections most responsible for various class analyses of the poem. However, I think it is a mistake to conclude, as Stephen Henderson has, that Big Boy's song must therefore be for 'his middle-class friends'.² Big Boy's vision of heaven — of a just world — is much more radical than that. Sis Joe and the Yankee Captain, Maumee Annie and the red Brakeman, the little children and the few guzzlin', cuttin' sisters and brothers who *will* be in that number constitute the *worthy*, not the bourgeoisie. In this regard, parts III and IV initiate Brown's contribution to the proletarian art of the American 1930s. A direct line can be drawn from the idea of the People put forth here to that which can be found in Brown's *No Hidin' Place* poems. Big Boy's selection of saints is also Brown's selection of an audience and subject matter for a new poetry by the American Negro.

The closure of the poem is layered in a lovely way. Part V begins,

*Ie got a dear ole mudder,
She is in hebbin' I know —*

With these lines the song introduced as Big Boy's mother's favourite becomes rather fittingly a song about her and about meeting her in the 'restful place':

*Mammy,
Li'l mammy — wrinkled face,
Her brown eyes, quick to tears — to joy —
With such happy pride in her
Guitar-plunkin' boy.
Oh kin't I be one in number?*

*I pray to de Lord I'll meet her
When de saints go ma'chin' home*

Here, closure is achieved within the song itself. The mother joins the neighbours and distant kin already incorporated into the song. Embrace of all, but especially of the mother, occurs when Big Boy sings himself into the chant as well. With that, 'When de Saints' is fully sung, and a certain exhilarating vision of community in both this and another world is complete.

But closure must also occur within the performance of which the song is but a part. Hence, there is yet another section to the poem, part VI:

He'd shuffle off from us, always, at that —
His face a brown study beneath his torn berimmed hat,
His broad shoulders slouching, his old box strung
Around his neck: — he'd go where we
Never could follow him — to Sophie probably,
Or to his dances in old Tinbridge flat.

The shift from Big Boy's song to the persona's narrative, or, from his voice to that of a persona speaking for Big Boy's audience, completes the frame initiated in the poem's opening lines. One effect of our attention being returned to the audience is that the primacy of the total group performance over and above an individual's singing of a song is once more underscored. Another is that the audience's story or tale of Big Boy enters into a kind of harmony with Big Boy's song, the grand result being that song and tale join together to suggest the full dimensions of an enduring communal performance. Indirectly but clearly, the charge of vagrancy with which the poem begins is further qualified as well. One part of the town chased him away; the other, with strong feelings in their hearts, watched him go. Surely, by the end of the poem we know that Big Boy has vocation as well as visible support.

II: THE BALLADIC UNIT AS A WRITTEN FORM

Unlike many of the poets preceding him, including Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown rarely passed up an opportunity to improvise upon traditional forms for the purposes of written art. Examples of this abound in 'When de Saints', but the poem's first stanza is perhaps a special example in that it may be seen as a variation upon a traditional structural unit — the balladic unit — that is

larger and yet less apparent than those to which the writer of poetry usually turns.

In most instances, especially in Afro-American letters, the 'folk' poet focuses his or her attention on the traditional stanza, usually the quatrain readily found in balladry. Examples of this are easily found in the poetry of Frances E. W. Harper, Dunbar, Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks, to cite a few major authors. However, as Buchan has shown, the traditional balladeer frequently groups stanzas into pairs or triads which become the large structural units of a song, or, more precisely, of that song's performance.⁸ The traditional poet never needs to say or otherwise indicate that a unit has been formed. The audience senses that this has occurred when a balance, antithesis, apposition, or parallelism initiated in one stanza (or 'verse') is completed in another. Since these stanzaic units often function synchronically within the ballad with comparably significant units of character and narrative structure, they are far more conspicuous to the traditional poet's audience than are the individual stanzas comprising them. The audience is therefore usually more attentive to stanzaic units than to stanzas, and hence more aware of how they assume the greater role in the building of the song or poem.

Brown appears to have had all of this fully in mind while composing the first stanza of 'When de Saints', which should be offered once again at this point:

He'd play, after the bawdy songs and blues,
After the weary plaints
Of 'Trouble, Trouble deep down in mah soul',
Always one song in which he'd lose the rôle
Of entertainer to the boys. He'd say,
'My mother's favourite'. And we knew
That what was coming was his chant of saints:
'When de saints go ma'chîn' home...'
And that would end his concert for the day.

Within these lines, vestiges of two traditional balladic stanzas are easily found. The first quatrain is located within Brown's first four and a half lines. The second is found in what remains of the stanza after the caesura in the fifth line. While a precise construction of the two balladic quatrains is impossible, chiefly because there is no ur-text to retrieve and work from, it is safe to say that the first quatrain begins with 'He'd play...', and that 'He'd say' initiates the second. Here, without going further, we can see how the quatrains balance one another and begin to form a large stanzaic unit. The movement from 'He'd play...' to 'He'd

say' in and of itself completes a distinct pattern of repetition with variation. This pattern is further developed structurally when phrases of song are offered just before the closure of each stanza. In short, there is a basis in phrase and structure alike for the balancing, appositional construction of the vestigial balladic unit forming the core of Brown's written form.

What emerges here is a clear suggestion of written improvisation upon traditional art forms in which the writing artist has boldly decided to reproduce that art's structural logic instead of merely duplicating its meters, rhyme schemes, and signatures. In Brown's stanza, the vestigial balancing quatrains are best described as units of structure. They consist not so much of four strict lines as of four specific blocks of logic or meaning. Each quatrain adheres to an A, B, B, C pattern of development which can be charted as follows:

A: He'd play...

B: ...after the bawdy songs and blues.

B': After the weary plumes/ Of 'Trouble, Trouble deep down in muh soul,

C: Always one song in which he'd lose the rôle/ Of entertainer to the boys...

A: He'd say/ 'My mother's favourite'....

B: And we knew/ That what was coming was his chant of saints

B': 'When de saints go ma'chin' home....'

C: And that would end his concert for the day.

Obviously, the phrases isolated above cannot be sung or scanned as conventional balladic lines. Moreover, when assembled together in Brown's stanza, they create nine lines, not eight. For some, these points would indicate that Brown is not working with the balladic model of paired quatrains. But that is not the case. Most certainly, the A, B, B', C pattern is a balladic pattern. Its presence as structure in Brown's stanza confirms that written poetry can be in some fundamental sense traditional or of the folk without displaying the outward trappings of traditional forms.

To write a stanza based upon the structural order of the balladic unit instead of the rhyme scheme of the individual ballad quatrain was obviously an extraordinary experiment for an Afro-American poet to undertake, especially in 1927. Brown assumed the challenge, and did so, I believe, for a high purpose. He wanted to create a written stanza full of folk expression (texts and textures) and direct reference to traditional performance (contexts).⁹ He desired as well to write in such a way that reader response to his written art would at least approximate audience response to traditional performance. Finally, he also desired to fashion

yet another reply to those who argued that traditional forms could not spawn a serious Afro-American written art. Quite astutely, he saw that he could achieve all three of his goals if he could render the balladic unit as a written form.

III: PRINCIPLES FOR A WRITTEN POETRY

Throughout this discussion it has been suggested that 'When de Saints' constitutes something of a blueprint for a new Negro poetry. More should be said at this point.

I think it is fair to say that when Brown came to the writing of poetry in the 1920s, most Afro-American poets, including especially those interested in creating a written folk poetry, were wrestling with two formidable and rather intimidating models. One, which we commonly associate with Paul Laurence Dunbar, asserted that a poetic line in the folk manner had to be transformed into 'literary English' before it was capable of rendering what Dunbar termed '...the world's absorbing/beat'.¹⁰ The other model, displayed most successfully by James Weldon Johnson in *God's Trombones*, argued not so much for a literary standardization of the folk line as for its 'classicization'. Classicizing differed from standardizing in that while diction and often grammar were to be transformed, other 'folk' stylistic features were to be retained — or restrainfully simulated in new but clearly derivative rhythms, enjambments, and repetitive patterns. The following stanzas from Johnson's 'Go Down Death (A Funeral Sermon)' illustrate my point:

Weep not, weep not
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.
Heart-broken husband — weep no more;
Grief-stricken son — weep no more;
She's only just gone home

And Jesus took his own hand and wiped away her tears,
And he smoothed the furrows from her face,
And the angels sang a little song,
And Jesus rocked her in his arms,
And kept saying: Take your rest,
Take your rest, take your rest.
Weep not — weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.¹¹

Johnson's '...Take your rest./ Take your rest, take your rest' means much the same thing, and is intended to have much the same effect, as Brown's '...take yo' time..../ Honey, take yo' bressed time' in 'Sister Lou'. But Johnson would have rejected Brown's version as the less artistic of the two — or at least he would have done so in the years before he agreed to write the Introduction to the first edition of Brown's *Southern Road*.

Both models seem to argue that the act of poetic closure figuratively expressing the full form and range of the Afro-American poetic canon cannot be achieved without radically altering the traditional features of the initiating or calling line. According to the Dunbar model, for example, a line like Brown's 'Trouble, Trouble deep down in muh soul' must be standardized as 'I know what the caged bird feels./ Alas' before the Afro-American poet can venture a serious closing line such as 'I know why the caged bird sings' or, 'The Master in infinite mercy/ Offers the boon of Death'.¹² In this example, not only is the traditional texture of Brown's line standardized (Dunbar's 'Alas' takes care of that) but the contextual posture of the persona-poet is altered as well. Indeed, one might say that the new artist of the standardized lines knows a great deal about the caged bird precisely because he has forsaken a performance-centred artistic posture for a writerly pose within the romantic prison of solitude.

Several of Brown's early poems such as 'To a Certain Lady, in Her Garden' and 'Virginia Portrait' clearly show his admiration for the Romantic poets. But others, including all the Big Boy poems, make clear that he for the most part rejected the role of the artist as self-garretted prisoner. This meant, in the terms used before, that Brown decided to commit himself not only to initiating a poem and canon with lines like 'Trouble, Trouble deep down in muh soul' but to closing and shaping poem and canon alike with lines such as 'When de saints go ma'chin' home'. His point was nothing less than that 'When de saints go ma'chin' home' is a stronger line than the standardized 'The Master in infinite mercy/ Offers the boon of Death' or the classicized 'She's only just gone home'. That was a bold claim to make in 1927.

From all of this three major principles for a written Afro-American folk poetry seem to emerge, and all three principles are evident in 'When de Saints'. The first principle is that a poet need not abandon the 'received diction' generated by a traditional culture's art events in order to give written poetic stature to an artistic form initiated within that culture. 'When de saints go ma'chin' home....' completes Big Boy's performance and Brown's poem alike precisely because it is fully capable

of embodying and announcing a serious moment in each. A second principle is that while a writing poet cannot fully create a performance context in written art, he or she should not therefore assume that aspects of performance have no place in the written poem, or that the proper poetic posture for the writing artist is *ipso facto* a non-performative posture. Quite to the point, 'When de Saints' presents both an artist (Big Boy) and a poet (Brown's persona) who, in accord with the enduring aesthetics of performance events, share in the creation of interrelated, multigeneric artistic forms. Within the context of a specific communal performance inspired by Big Boy, the poet has been a true listener. When the poet in turn tells his tale of Big Boy, his song, and the performance mutually created by singer, song, and audience, his act of listening in the past achieves one of its prefigured fulfillments in art. Building upon this, the third principle asserts that a serious moment in written art can be a shared moment. A poet need not sing, as does Dunbar's model artist, 'From some high peak, nigh/ yet remote,' in order to evoke and sustain a fitting solemnity. As suggested before, Big Boy's quieting down of the boys schools us as to the great distinction between silence and solitude. His shift from 'I' to 'we' — apparent in the movement from 'muh soul' to 'de saints' — seems to confirm that the creation of silence can be an act of sharing voice. Brown's great point seems to be that the shared serious moments in communal performance events can be emotive and structural models for the shaping of comparable moments in written art. Put another way, performance aesthetics can abet the pursuit of written forms once the writing artist sees that he or she must emulate the performing artist and the performing audience alike.

The collection and vivid presentation of these principles in 'When de Saints' renders that poem a major cultural and aesthetic document of the Afro-American 1920s. It 'corrects' Du Bois's 'Criteria for Negro Art', complements Hughes's 'The Negro Writer and the Racial Mountain', and generally provides a point of view on Afro-American literature which was rarely offered by the chief movers-and-shakers of the Harlem Renaissance — the exception being, of course, Zora Neale Hurston.

In 'When de Saints Go Ma'ch'in' Home', Sterling Brown introduces Big Boy Davis and his song, and presents an idea for a new poetry by American Negroes as well. The poem calls for social realism in a written American art which doesn't just portray communities but creates them. It urges the Afro-American poet to discover and pursue a new and more honest idea of the 'serious moment' in written art. It calls for poems which Brown succeeded in giving us many times, and for performances

of poetry much on the order of folk events which Brown also has given us time and again. We expect certain preachers to give us their 'Dry Bones' sermon at Eastertime; we anticipate Big Boy's singing of 'When de Saints'; and we eagerly await each and every portrait-in-performance Brown offers of Sister Lou, Big Boy, Old Lem, Slim Greer, Ma Rainey, and the Strong Men. In this way, envisioned some fifty years ago, Brown keeps what we share alive.

NOTES

1. 'When de Saints Go Ma'chlin' Home' first appeared in *Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life*, V (July, 1927), 48. It won the journal's award for poetry in 1928.
2. The other 'Big Boy' poems are 'Odyssey of Big Boy' and 'Long Gone'. 'Odyssey' first appeared in Countee Cullen, ed., *Caroling Dusk* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927); 'Long Gone' in James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931). All three 'Big Boy' poems were collected in Brown's *Southern Road* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932).
3. The text of 'When de Saints' used here and throughout this essay appears in *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), pp.26-30.
4. David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p.170.
5. I refer here to the 'plantation tradition' in *fin de siècle* American popular literature which Brown himself discusses in *The Negro in American Fiction* (Washington: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1938) and *Negro Poetry and Drama* (Washington: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1938).
6. Stephen Henderson, 'The Heavy Blues of Sterling Brown: A Study of Craft and Tradition', *Black American Literature Forum*, XIV, No 1 (Spring 1980), p.35.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk*, pp.87-104. This section of my discussion is substantially indebted to Buchan's analysis of the Scottish ballad.
9. The distinctions Alan Dundes makes between folk texts, textures, and contexts are by now familiar to all folklorists, if not all literary critics. They appear in various guises throughout this essay. See Dundes, 'Texture, Text, and Context', *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 28 (1964), 251-63.
10. See Dunbar's 'The Poet', *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1926), p.151.
11. The text quoted here appears in Arna Bontemps, ed., *American Negro Poetry* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1963), pp.2-4.
12. See Dunbar's 'Sympathy', p.102, and 'Compensation', p.254.

This essay is based upon a paper delivered at the Sterling Brown Festival, Brown University, 1 May 1981.

John Agard

RAINBOW

When you see
de rainbow
you know
God know
wha he doing --
one big smile
across the sky --
I tell you
God got style
the man got style

When you see
raincloud pass
and de rainbow
make a show
I tell you
is God doing
limbo
the man doing
limbo

But sometimes
you know
when I see
de rainbow
so full of glow
and curving
like she bearing child
I does want to know
if God
ain't a woman

If that is so
the woman got style
man she got style

Nora Vagi Brash

TOTAL ECLIPSE

Grandmother and the old people
All agree how it happens.
They know they say that
The much desired moon woman
Elopes with an earth man lover
Swallowed by a jealous angry god.

The scientists and astronomers
All agree how it happens.
They know they say
The precise movements of Earth, Sun and Moon
And how the shadow of one masks the other.
Telescopes and cameras ready
They wait at their predicted time
To prove what they say they know.

But a thick curtain of black clouds
obscures their view
and the drama is hidden from their eyes.
But not grandmother, she and the old people
Know about clouds too.
It's very clear to them
the moon embarrassed by too much staring
Hides her face in shame.

Five Stars for Mr Tompkins

For Mr Preston, part of the thrill of a special outing was studying the paper every night to see what was offering and then the few short days of preparation and anticipation that preceded the actual outing itself.

There wasn't a lot of choice because he had to get the right combination of age and walking distance but he usually managed to get a special outing about once a month.

He had long realised the worth of the daily newspaper. It had become an absolute essential in his life because it provided him with a fund of information about the sort of entertainment he preferred. He placed it high on his list of necessities along with rent, food and electricity and he looked forward to its arrival every afternoon around five.

When he'd been in his early sixties he used to go out at nights to public meetings. They were exciting events because, even though the seats were hard, he could sit in among people who were participating, who were experiencing emotions — anger mostly, but often sympathy, amusement or admiration. He could experience this emotion himself, he could participate himself. It gave him a sense of importance and belonging.

Occasionally there would be a free film or slide evening advertised. This was the pinnacle of his existence — going out to the pictures at night. His old age pension did not afford him such a luxury and he was grateful to go along and watch free films or slides on any subject under the sun.

That was when he first realised the value of the newspaper because most of the inner city meetings were advertised and he was able to plan his outings a few days in advance. Sometimes he was regretfully forced to choose between two excellent meetings on the same night and, although it was a pity to have to waste one of them, it did at least create an hour or two of exciting deliberation in order to make a final choice.

Nowadays, of course, it was too risky to go out at night. He caught cold easily in the chilly night air and he knew only too well the distinct threat that congestion posed to his vital daytime activities. Reluctantly, he had had to abandon his beloved evening outings.

But in retrospect perhaps it hadn't been such a bad thing after all, for it had made him more inventive, more enterprising, more determined to find an exciting substitute for his lost outings. He had spent a long time thinking about it, although the actual idea hadn't taken long to perfect, and even though he'd been a bit shaky on his first few outings, he'd soon settled down and begun to thoroughly enjoy them. They became the new pinnacle of his existence, his very own special outings.

That was why today, sitting in his poky little kitchen, Mr Preston was feeling all fluttery and excited. Another special outing had arrived. It was due to start at 11 a.m. and he had had to rise earlier than usual in order to dress carefully and walk the distance slowly so that he would arrive at an appropriate time without being red-faced and breathless.

He studied the curtained-off cupboard which contained his clothes. Plenty of choice of shoes, he thought as he selected a black pair and took down the cardboard shoe-cleaning box from the shelf. Their owners had long gone, he reflected, leaving him to walk their shoes for them. Like walking their dogs he decided, or, taking it a bit further, literally stepping into their shoes.

He chuckled at his joke as he reached for his dark-grey suit. It, too, was second-hand from an Opportunity Shop some years ago but, unlike the shoes, it was now beginning to show its age. He had been forced to reserve its use for special outings only and for the rest of the time he wore a pair of brown corduroys and a double-breasted black jacket that had been left to him by old Mr Moser from the flat next door.

And a good thing the jacket had fitted him, too, he thought as he studied his image in the oval dressing-table mirror and saw that his tie needed re-knotting. Because by then his old double knit cardigan had been threadbare under the arms and badly frayed around the cuffs and pockets.

If he had a wish, he told his image, it would be that the government would give all pensioners free clothing coupons which they could spend anywhere they liked. He personally did not like second-hand clothing but there seemed to be no other choice at present. He decided that he would write a letter to the editor of the evening paper suggesting the coupons. A pleasing vision formed in his mind's eye and he winked at his reflection. He saw his letter in print, with his name beneath it. B.J. Preston, Pensioner.

The bedside clock showed that it was time to leave. He felt a surge of excitement in his stomach as he checked his heater, put on his dark-grey felt hat and let himself out of his front door.

Miss Moser was out in her garden when he got to his gate but, as usual,

she turned her back on him and hurried inside. She had not spoken to him since he'd cut off a few overhanging branches of her walnut tree three years before.

He raised his hat with mock politeness and addressed himself to a lamp post. 'Good morning, Miss Moser. How are you, Miss Moser? Isn't it a lovely day?'

And it certainly was. In fact, it was a beautiful day -- almost too beautiful to be indoors. But there it was. The show must go on. Besides, he had often heard it said that the better the day, the better the deed. He waved his hand airily to nobody and said, 'Cheerio Miss Moser. I'm going out for the day but I'll see you when I get back.' He felt his spirits lift gloriously as he carefully crossed the road.

By the time he reached the Mansfield Memorial Park he found that he was a little ahead of schedule so he decided to stay and rest for a few minutes. Wellington was such a beautiful city in springtime and it was so nice there in the sun that he was almost tempted to stay on. But then he remembered that he had worn his good suit for the special outing and therefore the wearing could not be wasted. Ultimately, the outing would give him hours of beautiful memories to mull over and it would be much more rewarding than just sitting there dozing in the sun.

He walked on again, keeping to the inside of the footpath and stopping occasionally to glance casually through people's front windows or to observe out of the corner of his eye someone he thought he recognized from his younger days.

At 10.50 a.m. Mr Preston arrived to begin his special outing. Others had already come and were filing in, quietly and unobtrusively. They were mostly of his own generation although there were one or two young ones, but he didn't think the occasion would have much appeal for them.

He took a seat near the middle, not wishing to intrude into the centre of the activity but wanting to be near enough to hear all that was said and to observe every little detail. It was times like these, he thought as he looked around him, that he was grateful for the excellent memory recall that he still possessed. It meant that every precious moment could be recorded and stored for future use.

The church itself was as stately as a galleon and as beautiful as the day outside it. The stained glass windows and highly polished pews, the gleaming brass nameplates hanging in silent tribute to loved ones long gone, all reflected the loving care which had been bestowed on the church since its inception at the turn of the century. The flowers for today's ceremony were the only real evidence of something new in the church yet they, too, had about them the look of a loving arrangement.

Other churches he had visited on his special outings had never quite come up to the standard of this one in his estimation. Old St Paul's, they called it. Old like him, he supposed, but it was certainly the church where he felt most at ease. He watched the minister as he walked down the aisle. The black and white of his robes seemed to be in stark contrast with the warm golden light that filtered through the coloured glass windows and spread itself over the waiting people.

The minister stopped for a brief word with an elderly woman, touched a younger man gently on the shoulder and then carried on to the pulpit.

The organ began playing its special music and a stir ran through the congregation. 'Dearly beloved...' said the minister manfully and the funeral service began.

* * * * *

For the first time since entering the church, Mr Preston allowed himself to look at the casket lying there at the foot of the altar. It had a single wreath of white lilies on the lid and it contained the body of 83-year-old Edgar Archibald Tompkins. Mr Preston knew this because he'd obtained the details from the evening paper three nights previously.

He also knew that Edgar Tompkins' wife was named Isobel and that during their married life they'd had three children, two of whom were now grandparents and one who was apparently unmarried and resident in California. Edgar Tompkins had served in both the First and Second World Wars and was a Justice of the Peace at the time of his death. He had obviously lived a full and constructive life and was now about to be given an appropriate funeral. It was all very sad and emotional and Mr Preston thoroughly approved of it.

Each time he went to one of these occasions he was struck with the idea that it was rather like a rehearsal where he was the understudy, watching and waiting. It was as if he was learning his part ready for the time when the occasion would be in honour of him. In fact, as the service proceeded he found himself wishing that his own funeral would be just like this one for it was certainly very moving and the minister seemed to speak with such sincerity that Mr Preston felt quite exhilarated.

And that was what he liked about funeral services — the fact that he could get involved, participate emotionally with everyone else in the church. Today, as on all other occasions, it mattered little that he had never known the dead man. He could still grieve over his demise just the same. And he was quite sure that such a good-living and patriotic man as Edgar Tompkins would not have begrudged an old veteran the pleasure of grieving at his funeral.

In fact, Mr Preston felt so overcome with the beauty and simplicity of the service that he found himself wishing he had had enough left out of his pension to have bought a wreath — or to at least have sent a posy bowl to Mrs Tompkins.

But it was not just the funeral services that Mr Preston enjoyed. It was the cup of tea afterwards in the family home. Naturally, he never went to the graveside. People never expected it of him because he was too elderly, but when they saw him mingling with the others outside the church after the service they invariably approached him to enquire how he had known the deceased. And, naturally, he always said that he was an old, old friend from way back in the war days. He felt himself to be on safe ground with wartime friendships because obviously none of the relatives had ever been there at the time. He always took great care to glean every scrap of information he could from each funeral notice and to rehearse his stories well in advance. And he always spoke in glowing terms of the unselfish attitude and military prowess of the dear departed one.

When the grieving relatives heard of Mr Preston's close association with their loved one during the time when they had had no knowledge of him, they were always eager for him to go back to the family home and have a cup of tea and scones or cakes. Mr Preston had no qualms about accepting their hospitality for he saw himself as a professional mourner — and a generous one at that. He asked no fee other than the food and drink and brief companionship and he gave in return comfort and beautiful memories to those who were left behind.

And today was no exception. The minister himself made the first approach after the service and, having assessed the value of Mr Preston's wartime friendship, introduced him to Mrs Tompkins and her eldest son from California. It seemed that they both had heart conditions and could not cope with the ordeal at the cemetery so they were driving home to put the kettle on and get things ready. When they heard the beautiful things Mr Preston had to say about their loved one, they implored him to come and tell them more.

Mr Preston was only too happy to oblige and soon found himself to be the centre of attention in the Tompkins' lounge, eating as many scones and cakes as he could and drawing on his vast store of wartime memories into which Edgar Tompkins fitted remarkably well, as had all the others before him. In fact, he was quite disappointed when the time came to leave but readily accepted that he had no choice in the matter.

A young woman offered him a lift back to the city and, as he had not even the price of a bus fare left out of his pension, he gratefully accepted.

it. This was always the risk he took, of course, that he would be left stranded out in some unfamiliar suburb, but so far he had never lost out. He made very sure of that with his quiet, gentlemanly demeanour and his neat appearance.

It was nearly five o'clock when the woman dropped him off at the cenotaph and, because he was full of all the good food he had consumed, it took him longer than usual to walk up Molesworth Street.

And, as he expected, when he turned the corner into his street, Miss Moser was out in her garden again. Of course she scuttled inside the moment she saw him but he was not bothered by her coolness. He raised his hat and spoke jauntily to her closed front door.

'Good evening, Miss Moser. Yes I had a very nice time, thank you. And you?' He took the evening paper from the box and let himself into the flat.

When he had hung up his suit and pushed his tired feet into his shabby slippers, he took the frying pan out of the cupboard under the sink and put a lamb chop on to cook with a teaspoon of dripping. Then he sat down to check the newspaper for anything that might be coming up by way of a special outing in the next few days.

There was nothing, it seemed, that had any prospect for him. Not even a memorial service. Well, that was alright. Having chosen old soldiers, he had long ago accepted the fact that he would have to wait around for them sometimes. He had, in the past, waited for up to three weeks before he'd had a lucky break. And then, on occasions, he'd had such a rush of them that he couldn't manage to be everywhere at once.

Meantime, there was the newspaper cutting of the funeral notice to paste into his scrapbook and, in a week or two, there would be an acknowledgement notice to watch for. He always looked forward to the acknowledgements because they thanked him personally and gave him an added sense of belonging. A kind of bonus, he always felt, and he had no compunction about claiming his share of the gratitude. Sometimes there was even an obituary to include and this was an added thrill, a final rounding out of his documentation.

Then, when the record was complete, he would grade the outing on a star system of one to five. In the past, some of his special outings had not been as successful as others. Some had not gone beyond the church service and it had then been a disappointing walk home to make his own cup of tea. But today was different. It had been a great success and he felt sure that he would grade it highly.

He closed his eyes contentedly and prepared his mind to make the decision.

A Nigerian Writer Living in London

In the Ditch was like my sixth child. I felt exactly like that, just as if I had had another child. It came out in June 1972, when I was twenty-seven, almost five years to the day when I first started to send articles to magazine editors. Its publication showed me another thing about creative writing, namely that one does well in the topic one knows best. Because I was living in the 'ditch', a lone parent with five children, I was able to write in more depth about this. I realized then that I would not have to wait till I was forty before writing. If only I could stick to the subjects I knew best, and write about them truthfully, about the way I felt or saw them, in the type of language I could manage best, then I would not go wrong.

But despite the little success I had with *In the Ditch* I was still bitter about all that was happening to me. Why did I make the mistake of marrying the man I did? Why was the world not blaming him for what he had done, and why was everybody blaming me for not forgiving him when he came back begging me to take him back? And why did the critics regard my enthusiasm about everything as naivety? And why were those people I met earlier on in my writing career so patronising, patting me nicely on the back whenever I could clean my own nose, and why was it accepted in certain circles, that any black woman who wanted to make it in a field like this, must marry white?

I did not know then what I was up against. It was a kind of experience which was more shocking than painful. I still laugh about one publisher who deducted the money he paid for all the dinners he took me to from my royalties. I won't say much because these people have so short a memory that those of them alive are still my friends. But though I finished *Second Class Citizen* in November 1972, it was not published until 1975, when I had given up hope of ever appearing in print again in England. The most important thing is that the book was published, and by a young publishing firm who were then regarded as a radical firm.

Funnily enough, it became a classic, and some still regard it as the best work I have ever produced. But all I know was that after this book I felt confident about regarding myself as a writer.

It is very autobiographical. I was trying to answer all the questions people asked about in *In the Ditch*. In chronological order of happenings, *Second Class Citizen* should have been published before *In the Ditch*. But, as I have explained earlier, *In the Ditch* just happened.

The language in *Second Class Citizen* is chattier, like that of someone making out a case. Even though I was bitter, I was becoming slightly guilty because I was making a success out of my life. Somehow there is that thread of belief in Christianity which makes one believe that this world is a place for suffering. And if one does not suffer all the time, one is destined for the everlasting fire. We all know that the Bible says that 'Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God'. I knew even then that one should not take all that Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount too literally, especially when one sees the very rich living rich and dying rich in the developed part of the world. Yet, that doubt had been sown in me, and however much I tried to quell it, it would pop up in some rather embarrassing situations. So because of this and for many other reasons I felt I had to tell my readers my background, as a means of justifying whatever goodies I was having at the moment. By the time I was nearing the end of the book, I had completely fallen out with my first publishers, so I thought it would never be published anyway. So I went all out, and in my own brand of English, for I had somehow forgotten the Cockney language I mastered when I was living at the Pussy Cat Mansions. Much later, many people saw some similarities of form between *Second Class Citizen* and Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. All I can say is that I write in what I consider my own style and choose my subjects in my own way. If there is any resemblance to the Dickensian models, then it is purely accidental. But maybe it is not so accidental because, like all secondary school children in English Colonial Africa, we knew most of Dickens' work almost parrot fashion. So our brand of English still sounds like that of these early masters, and very much like what one hears over the World Service of the BBC. I think that is one of the reasons I can never write a book like *In the Ditch* again. I learnt, and was forced to speak the London accent then for the sake of survival. If I had started to speak my classical biblical cum Dickensian English then, I would have gone under.

Because I have fallen out with my first publishers, all well-known publishers refused to accept *Second Class Citizen*. So my hope of making a living from writing was dashed even before it was born. I then took to

teaching to supplement my income, still hoping that one day I would be published. When it did come, I was this time cautious in my enthusiasm. But the book was well received and brought me again into the lime-light. I find it very difficult to cope with publicity. Many people would find this difficult to believe, but it is true that if I could afford not to appear at any launching or the post-mortem interviews that follow publications, I would do so. But one has to do these things to please one's publishers. And because of this publicity, my relationship with people became very difficult. I got bored with the boring ones very easily. I can now afford to avoid such people, but before I had to put up with them, because otherwise I would be friendless, alone. I was learning to enjoy being alone in order to be able to gather my thoughts. I soon gave up teaching for it was affecting my work. I could no longer cope with the staff-room situation, with the children, and especially with the fact that I had to teach Social Sciences, a subject I was growing disenchanted with. I did not mind giving talks on these subjects once in a while, but to keep talking about them every day to children who in most cases would rather be working and earning some money was just too bad. I felt I'd had enough. I went into Community Work, and the same thing happened. Then Camden Borough told me they were closing my branch of Mother and Toddler's Club and would I like to go and work in Kilburn, another part of London. I refused. I was going to set up on my own. I was going to be a full-time writer.

It was a precarious type of living, it can still be, especially if one has five growing children to feed, but like everything I was determined to do. I stuck it out. I am happy I did, because I think I became more relaxed, I became the type of dream mother I had been wanting to be with my children, and I could afford to indulge in my thoughts and was able to write about anything that came into my head.

I am glad I wrote *Second Class Citizen*. Because with that book, all my bitterness evaporated. I remember when I gave an interview to a young journalist on that book, she cried all through when I tried to relive all that I had gone through. Sophisticated and very modern people kept asking me, 'Why did you stay in such a marriage for so long?' The simple answer was that I was not brought up to think that there was any other life for a respectable Christian woman. I now know better; writing that book was therapy, and from the hundreds of letters I have received from women all over the world, I am equally glad to know that it has helped many women.

I did not start as a feminist. I do not think I am one now. Most of my readers would take this to be the statement of a coward. But it is not. I

thought before that I would like to be one, but after my recent visit to the United States, when I talked to real 'Feminists' with a capital 'F', I think that we women of African background still have a very very long way to go before we can really rub shoulders with such women. Their ideas are so far ahead. For example, I met a group of women in California who wanted their state to make legal the idea of two women living together. I begged them not to come to Nigeria or to many parts of Africa with such a message. The men would not throw them out, the women would.

What I am doing is writing social documentary novels, based upon what I have seen and experienced in my part of Africa. If the men folk think this is Feminism, then I am a Feminist. But whatever they think, would not deter me from writing about what I see, and how I feel — that marriage should not be the only career left to women, it should be one of the careers; and that if it fails, the woman should not be labelled a social failure and be rejected by her people and his people; that in marriage, no one has the right to own the other to such an extent that one becomes the nodding shadow of the head of the family; that I would like to see social services developed, and that mothers should be given what is called 'Family Allowance' in Britain. I don't know if I could have raised my children without the little social benefit I received. I also felt that women should be economically independent so that they do not have to choke their growing children with responsibility, so much so that the children are not able to develop to their full potentiality.

I know the men would say 'what of us?' Well, this may be so. But most of Africa is a man's kingdom, with the exception of parts of Southern Africa where women have to own the land because the men are busy working in the mines. Such men are still busy fighting for their freedom, and the women there cannot talk of real freedom until the men are free, or so they say. But I am beginning to see South African women who are fighting at the same time for their own liberation.

I still think it is a mistake to suppress half the population of a country just because the other half wants to remain supreme all the time. It is such a waste, and if all human beings are allowed to achieve their full potential, in all walks of life, the country would not lose, but gain by it. India's Indira Gandhi, Britain's Margaret Thatcher are two examples of women who have reached the highest offices in their countries. So, my sisters in America, I am not shunning your advanced help, in fact I still think women of Africa need your contribution, and at the same time we need our men. Only we have to stay within the system and fight or nag from within it. I still think that there is nothing as beautiful as a very compatible marriage. Some lucky women's closest friends are their

husbands. I have seen this as well, in the 1980s. In short, my novels cover most of the above mentioned social topics. They may progress to a more political level, but for the moment, I keep to the day-to-day problems of the community life of women in the villages and the cities of Africa south of the Sahara.

After *Second Class Citizen*, I told myself that I would write a completely imaginative work. I went back to my ancestral home in Ibusa and set up a love story which I thought was going to be a master-piece. I thought this was going to be the best work I had ever produced. I was very sentimental about this book because it was the first one I had written, but it had been burnt by my husband because he thought it would be an embarrassment to his family, because my bride price had not been paid then. Incidentally, his mother paid my bride price five years after I had left him. Poor kind lady, she thought that would bring me back and 'settle' me down, because our people thought that there must be something wrong with my head to keep living the way I did. A well-meaning aunt said to me once when she came to visit me in London, 'Have you ever heard a woman say «no» to her husband, «I do not want you»? It is an abomination. Never say a thing like that. Only men have the right to say «no, I do not want you» to their wives. So, Buchi, stop saying that, and stop pouring sand into the eyes of us, your relatives.' As usual I agreed with her, but when she had gone, Buchi went on being Buchi. I just can't help it. Maybe there is something really wrong, but whatever it is, I am happy to live with it.

So back to *The Bride Price*. It was romantic. I put in all the romance my life lacked. And because I felt I was having life too easily, I had to kill Akunna, the heroine, just as I felt I should have died for marrying someone who did not pay my bride price, because I was being modern and a Christian. Again, like *Second Class Citizen*, after this book I stopped yearning for romance in real life. I seemed to have captured it all and poured it into that book, just as I have poured all my anger into *Second Class Citizen*. And to think I started writing *The Bride Price* as an imaginative piece of work. Come to think of it, is there anything like a completely imaginative work?

The first chapter of *The Bride Price* was my father's burial. We lived in that street, all the people even retain their real names. My first visit to Ibusa was like that, but I omitted the most painful experience, the clitorisation. In fact it is the first time I am bringing that into any book, because it is autobiographical in a much closer sort of way. The rest of the book are bits of things that happened here and there, but which I brought together. I do not always agree with the way my people treat

those whose ancestors happened to be slaves and who in some cases have lived with us for many generations. And during my school holidays I used sometimes to go and live with my kind relative and his family, the Halims at Ughelli Government College. That gave me the scene of Akunna's death.

Funnily enough, I wrote this book thinking that, apart from it being my best, it would be my first published in Africa, Nigeria. But the book did not bring me the accolade I thought it would. It just goes to show that public opinion is such a difficult horse to back. When you think they'll go this way, it's then that they go the other way. One critic said, 'This book is Romeo and Juliet African style.' I hope this proves to be so in the future. But what I know is that all African teenagers who have read all my books, or most of them, think that *The Bride Price* is still my best. What do I think of it now? I sometimes feel like throwing up after reading it. I hate the sight of it, and *In the Ditch* as well. I don't know why. I am happy I wrote those books when I did, because I could not imagine myself ever being so stupidly romantic. Have I grown harder? I don't know. All I know is that I have become very pragmatic.

Some of the subject matter of *The Bride Price* spilled over into a play I wrote for BBC Television. But by the time *A Kind of Marriage* appeared, I had had time to read *The Bride Price* in full, and I saw how romantic and girlish my thoughts had been. So the heroine in this play wanted her individuality in her marriage. And she got it, because she contributed equally to the family purse. She did not have to die because she failed her husband in not having many sons.

From then on, I think I started becoming an adult. My style was still unadorned, and though I keep telling myself that I shall really make it sophisticated one day, by now I have learnt that I never will. That type of racing, no nonsense, chatty style is now me. I talk that way, and I write that way.

That play for the BBC, coupled with another one I wrote for British Commercial Television, and the accumulated royalties from the other three books, gave me enough money to put down-payment on a fairly large terrace house in London. This was a psychological boost, even though it was like a white elephant that first year. Luckily, people began to realize that my writing and speech were identical, racy, sardonic and trenchant; in other words, I could lecture as well as write. A little income started to trickle in that way, too. It paid many a bill, and still does.

After *The Bride Price*, I did *The Slave Girl*. This was then the most tortuous. For the first time, I wrote without having seen the setting of the book. For the first time, I had to research my location, and for the first

time I had to recall the story my mother told me of her life. Then I included an idea I had thought out about Victorian Christianity being a double yoke for the African woman. Before the arrival of the colonial masters, she was not treated as an equal, but she had a place of respect in her family, and if she happened to be the head wife, her position was very prestigious. Readers of Chinua Achebe will remember in *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo's senior wife was invited to drink the palm wine her husband has left. She accepted this gratefully and on bended knees. The younger wives did not qualify to drink the husband's left-overs. It was a great honour accorded the senior wife. But Christianity, the Victorian version, took this little prestige away from the African woman. So in *The Slave Girl*, the African woman around 1902 was better off in slavery than in some kind of Christian marriage.

This book, which was almost all imaginative, was the most difficult one to write and therefore, I had thought, would be the most difficult one to read. Even one of my publishers had moaned, 'There is not much story line in this book,' and I agreed with him. Well, it won me two awards, the Jock Campbell and the Caribbean. By coincidence, the Jock Campbell Award was given by *The New Statesman*, the very magazine with which I had served my apprentice days. But by this time, they were a different set of people. Things do change so fast. None of them even remembered who I was when the award was given.

Chronologically speaking, *The Slave Girl* is the earliest book I have written. I decided that I would not write a story so far back again until I had visited Nigeria and spoken to the old people still living. So I came nearer to my own lifetime; that was the war years. The grass cutter in *Jays of Motherhood* was a distant uncle I used to know, but apart from that and some of the scenes in the loco-yard, the rest of the book was imaginative. But you know my kind of imagination — mostly based on places I have seen, or heard of.

My own children are now approaching adulthood, and as a warning to myself to practise what I preach and not to be the type of parent who would say 'After all I have done for you' I warn parents, mothers in particular, that the joy of being a parent is just the joy of having children and looking after them. If a parent expects reward as our grand-parents did, then they are asking too much. Things have changed. It now takes years of education to make a modern adult. Not like before when a lad of sixteen would shoulder his family's responsibilities. But if one is lucky to have a child that remembers and is grateful, then that is an added bonus. The joy of motherhood is the joy of giving all to one's children. The moral for the modern woman is that whilst giving all, one should

keep something, some self-respect, preferably a career, or a business. It is unfair to expect young people to give up their lives and come to look after their old people. Having said that, I don't mean that Africa should give up the idealistic community life we have so perfected, so much so that it has now become the envy of many parts of the world. Wherever possible the old person or parent should live with her family, as a member of the extended family, and contribute to the richness of her family.

I now notice that whilst writing this, another type of granny is creeping into our social scene. This is the granny who is too busy with her social group and her church duties to have any time for her grand-children.

Well, I don't write to change the world, nor to preach. I write about the world I know and the way I see it, so that others can read about it. I may not be one hundred percent right, nor even right at all, but above all things I know I must always be true to myself. If this type of independent modern old people are going to be the grannies of the future, well, who am I to change things? All I know and pray for is that the African medical sphere should develop enough to give adequate care to these people, care that perhaps my own generation will be needing. But in *Jays of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego died alone, whilst her children were still abroad, still working to become modern people.

The four children's books I have written follow the lines outlined above about my adult works, but simplified. *Titch the Cat*, a book for twelve to thirteen-year-olds, is based on the observations of my eleven-year-old daughter about our family pet, Titch. Some African critics have said that this is a highly Westernised book, because Titch does not eat mice, but is fed on commercial cat food. But, as I said earlier, I write about things as I see them. As I have never looked after a cat that feeds on mice, I can't write about one that does. *Nowhere to play* is again based on the observations of my twelve-year-old daughter, Chrisay. This is a problem for children living in some council flats in London — the problem of having nowhere to play. The other two books, *The Wrestling Match* and *The Moonlight Bride*, are very imaginative. The location of *The Wrestling Match* is fictitious. The place Akpei never existed, but I used this book to show young people that in any war or friendly fight that goes sour, nobody wins. This brings in the subject of my post-graduate research in London, the Youth Problem. People might say that Nigerian youth do not present problems, but many of them who could not get university places would not go back to the farms. They become big problems to their people until they accept their places and settle down in different kinds of apprenticeships. This book is for older children. *The Moonlight Bride* is a village tale, almost like *The Bride Price*, but with

no soppy romance. The heroine, an albino, is accepted as a bride because she is warm and cheerful, so much so that people forget her colour and call her 'Alatiriki' (electricity that has brought light to her husband's village, Odanta). I tried to touch the beauty of community life, and I hope I succeeded. These two books for young adults were commissioned especially by Oxford University Press for young African school children.

Most of my books are written about things and places I have known as a child. And thank goodness, I have a very good memory and can remember embarrassing details about things. But the danger was that I should start being nostalgic about events, so much so that I would start to romanticise them.

Because I was still not able to go to Africa and write from there, I started writing a war novel, *Destination Biafra*, which has now been published. The story is based on the civil war in Nigeria. I was here at the time but, funnily enough, those of us in London knew so much more about the war than many Nigerians living there. We had the comprehensive coverage by the British media, we demonstrated several times at Trafalgar Square, we collected money, and helped in so many ways. And when it was over, we talked to many people, and of course our families supplied their own versions. I remember an aunt gasping when I told her all I knew about the war. She said, 'I thought the war was only fought between the Ibos and the rest of Nigeria. How come you know about the massacre in Ibusa and Asaba? We never thought the news could reach you.' The news did reach us, and it still makes my heart bleed to realize that the financial sacrifices most of us Ibos, both eastern and western Ibos, made, have never reached the people for whom they were intended. To even know that some people grew rich out of that war! Maybe that was a lesson Nigeria needed to learn.

By now, I have become an established writer. *The Guardian* described me some time ago as a first-generation immigrant writing in London. And in America they say I am a Nigerian writer living in London. Nigerian papers still call me a Nigerian writer. I do not dispute all these categorizations, I do not even mind being called an African writer, even though many of my colleagues reject this because they claim it has a patronising ring. Well, maybe it has. All I know is that I am doing my work the best way I know how. But when people start disputing whether to regard me as an English writer writing about Africa, or to regard me as an African writing in English, I then know it is time to go home, or, if this is not possible, it is time to pay a long visit to Africa. Maybe my ideas are becoming too Europeanised.

I could stay here and not travel or visit Africa and specialise in writing about the black problem in England. But I don't want to. I feel more at home writing about the clear sand of the mid-western Ibo land, the plaintive voice of the evening announcer and the emptiness of the Eke markets after the people and the dancers have gone.

I shall for ever be a Nigerian writer working in Britain, for after all who can sniff eighteen years of one's life as nothing. And of course where one's family is and where they are happy, there will be, for ever, one's Shangri-La.

But as a child I have washed in the Atakpo stream. I have eaten the bitter crabs from Iyabi, I have eaten the Ukpa during the Iwe festival, and have danced my fathers' burial dance in the Eke market. These are my roots. And I feel I must go back there, live there, and tell the world through my books about the way we do our things.

Editor's note: Since writing this, Buchi Emecheta spent a year at Calabar. She has now returned to London.



Buchi Emecheta. Photo: Kirsten Holst Petersen.

Cyprian Ekwensi

INTERVIEW

Raoul Granqvist interviewed Cyprian Ekwensi on 5 December 1981.

The title of your recently published book Divided We Stand puzzles me. Isn't there a contradiction in the very title?

Yes, and it is deliberate. In Nigeria, I have noticed, each time a leader tries to unite the country, to bring everybody together by force or by coercion, there is always a struggle. But then if you allow each ethnic group or each division of the country to go its own way, there is never any peace. So we stand in division. Anybody who tries to push too hard about unity will bring about conflict in this country. This is the way I see it as a writer.

So you survive by being divided?

Yes, the various groups in this country value their independence, their culture, their own ethnicity, while regarding themselves as Nigerians. But if you try to force them into one country, speaking one language, worshipping the same God, there must be struggle. So probably the time has not come when 'united we stand'. This is the time of 'divided we stand'.

When will this be?

It has to take many generations and years. Unity does not come about out of someone talking you into it. But the only way out is to opt for unity. For instance, during the war, those of us who lived on this side of the Niger believed that we were threatened by an outside force. So we united.

During the colonial struggle Nigerians believed that the colonial administration was the enemy, so we united to fight that enemy. There has to be an external unifying force which is a threat, in a way, at least it works like that. So when that comes, and if after that external threat, we do not go back to what it was before that threat, then there will be a new stage of unity and so on until you reach the ultimate when you cannot go back to the original fragments that make the nation.

Divided We Stand was written in 1969 but published as late as 1980. Why did you delay it?

I did not delay the publication of the book. This is one of the books that taught me that there is politics in publishing. The publisher who makes all his sales in Nigeria will not want to offend the Nigerian government to the extent that he is told to pack and go. At the time this book was written it was too hot, tempers were too high. I wrote it during the war. The bombing was going on. The original title was 'Africhaos', chaos in Africa (one of the sub-titles in the book). Because one of the things that stood out during the war was that the African countries were powerless to get to the truth because they were observing international conventions, and my thesis in this book is that when any African state is threatened, Africans should discard international conventions and go after peace. They did not do that in this war. What they said was that we cannot interfere in the internal affairs of Nigeria. This is the international convention. But the African should be his brother's keeper. If you are killing your brother, you will not tell me, look, this is a family matter, do not come in. I will come in to see that you do not kill your brother. But the rest of Africa did not do that. And the world body, the United Nations, trusted the OAU to do this. But they did not do it. This is why I called the book 'Africhaos'.

You dedicated the book to 'those who lost their lives in the futile struggle, and to those who have survived to rule...'. What can it tell the rulers?

The companion volume to this book is *Survive the Peace*. There you have another contradictory title. You can survive the war, but you may not survive the peace. In fact, the period immediately after the war is dangerous. War has a sort of stabilizing effect. You learn to live with it. There will be so and so many air raids a day, there will be hunger, there will be starvation, there will be shortages. And suddenly the war is over. There is no more bombing. There is no real government. There is no

order. A lot more people were killed in the three days at the end of the war than during the two and a half year's war. I do not know if you have read recently about a Japanese who had been living in the jungle somewhere and was fighting forty years after the war. He didn't know that the war was over.

So the period of recovery is not over yet? And is there 'peace'?

No, no! Those of us on this side of the Niger are still underprivileged. Take for instance communications. We do not have the same communications as the rest of the country. You can dial from Lagos to any part of the country except here. We need a lot of catching up. Some of our schools are still on desks, on the floor, under trees.

Where do you stand as author in relation to your characters? Do you feel closer to your women characters? Their portraits are in any case more sympathetic.

If it is so — and it is for you to decide — I am not conscious of it. The author is a kind of medium. He reflects the emotions, passions, philosophy of his characters. He should not corrupt what passes through him. And if there is warmth passing through him when dealing with female characters, and brutality and harshness when treating male characters, it is a true reflection of his society. The same thing happens with the mode of speech and the mode of thinking. Take for instance the main character in *Jagua Nana*. She is an illiterate woman who lives in a semiliterate society. But she deals with sophisticated people. Her style of thinking and her approach to problems should be different from, say, the university graduate's. If you look at *Loka*, you will find a girl who is young, literate, a television model. She moves with other people than Jagua. There must be an interplay with the author and his characters. And for it to be authentic the author has to identify with his people, that is the characters in his book.

You write a lot of children's stories. Why?

I am very much at home with children. I come from a large family. I have a large family. I am very partial to them. I like to entertain them. And children take to me very easily. I was in the airport one day waiting for a plane and a friend of mine came in with his daughter, a girl of four.

She took to me and refused to go with her father. It became quite a scene. So I have a magnetism for them. My favourite story (from *Samankwe in the Strange Forest*, 1973) is about a young boy who plays truant at school and for the first time in his life he goes to drink palm wine and he gets very intoxicated and has strange dreams. The point of the story is that when he wakes up he is unable to distinguish the dream from the reality. At the police station they are able to convince him of the time lapses.

What novels do you write at the moment?

I have five novels in pregnancy. They are in various stages of development. I apply my mind differently. For instance, when I get an idea, I store it, I put it in the pigeon hole of that novel until I feel that it is ready to be written. Then I get out all the notes and look at them and write. And then you forget all the others. But the mind works in different directions all the time. And writing one novel your mind does not stop thinking about something else. It has happened many times that someone starts doing research on a particular subject and gets diverted by little points that interest you. You follow that point and you find it even bigger than the original thing. There is nobody who has ever written who does not have the idea that, oh, I would like to do a book on x or on y. You start building the x file and the y file right from that day, and it is there, and maybe there is one page or two pages in it. But you are simultaneously working on the z novel fully. This is the point. It is the fertility of ideas.

Which novel is uppermost in your mind?

It is a novel that will be called 'Jagua Nana's Daughter'. I was supposed to deliver it last September, but I failed. So much interest has been generated in *Jagua Nana* that a sequel was necessary. Then I have a small book called *An African Night's Entertainment* (1972). There is a story told by a story-teller which occupies the whole night, and at the end people who are supposed to be sleeping do not sleep because the story was so interesting. So I have two more: 'An African Morning's Entertainment' and 'An African Noon's Entertainment'. So I want to complete these three and I have the drafts of each of these. Then I have a novel which I call 'Daily Scrumble'. It is about the newspaper industry in Nigeria. There is still one more. It is a successor to *Motherless Baby* called 'Hundred Fathers'. Just as you have motherless babies, so you have

a boy who has a hundred fathers. Each of these five books is in a file ready to go. But I am concentrating on 'Jagua Nana's Daughter' right now.

You write in English, but to what extent do you deliberately transliterate the 'voices' you hear about you in Igboland?

For a writer to be authentic you have to have a feel for the tone of what you are writing in relation to the new language and not only just the tone or the mood but also the style of expression. That is why some of us write what you might not describe as Oxford English. It is African English. Because we have some picturesque phrases and styles that the English person does not have.

How do you transfer the Igbo way of speaking into your English?

It does not have to be through proverbs, unless the original language is the language of proverbs and riddles. But if it isn't and you try to force it to adopt them, it comes across as unconvincing. In the Igbo language, at least the older people speak in riddles and proverbs to shake up your mind so that you think. You get the meaning obliquely. That doesn't happen all the time in all the Nigerian languages. And I work on a wider canvas than most Nigerian writers. My books are based in north, east, south and west of Nigeria. I have lived all over the country. *Burning Grass* is pure Fullani. I have lived among the cattle men in the north. Their idioms and proverbs are quite different from those farther south here. You don't use them for colour's sake. They have to be authentic and real.

Have you tried to write in Igbo?

"Igbo has not, like Kikuyu, overcome its development problems. There is no Igbo language. If you are going to write in Igbo, you limit your audience by writing in an African language. And then you further limit it by writing in one African dialect. Well, I am not prepared to do it in the interest of literature, I am not prepared to do it. I am not prepared to go to study what is the sort of Esperanto Igbo which will be accepted by university and the Minister of Education, when I can speak quite happily to my mother and she can understand me. When they have worked out what the Igbo language should be, then they can go on writing or translate my works into Igbo if they are interested.

Pidgin English is used for advertisement on radio and in newspapers. It is used to reach out to certain layers or sections in Nigerian society. Will the next step be to encourage creative writers to use it?

Is that really necessary? If someone is literate, he does not want to go and write in an illiterate language, unless he is depicting illiteracy.

Is freedom of expression complete in Nigeria today?

The fact that General Obasanjo's book¹ was published alongside with General Madiebo's book² — two generals on opposite sides of the shooting line — is a sign that Nigeria is quite tolerant. And if you read our newspapers you will find that the President is taken to task equally as the man who lost the Presidency. There is a lot of free speech, more so than in many other African countries.

NOTES

1. *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (1979).
2. *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (1980).

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The New David Maillu

In the 1970s David Maillu emerged as the most significant popular writer in Kenya. This he accomplished not by writing school books for local branches of international publishing houses nor by soliciting the patronage of government-subsidized Kenyan publishers but by establishing his own firm, Comb Books, and inundating the market with novelettes and volumes of verse he himself had written, published, and then energetically promoted. His first 'mini-novel', *Unfit for Human Consumption* (1973), the costs of which had been underwritten partly by a loan from a friend and partly by a trade agreement with a distributor, had sold so well that he had been able to invest the proceeds in a second book, *My Dear Bottle* (1973), a poetic apostrophe to the consolation of inebriation. This too had been swallowed up quickly by a pop-thirsty reading public, and Maillu had plowed the profits back into the firm just as quickly, bringing out in the next year another mini-novel, *Troubles* (1974), and another humorous soliloquy in verse, *After 4.30* (1974), as well as reissuing the first two sold-out titles. By repeating this kind of pyramiding procedure, Maillu in four years was able to publish twelve books he himself had written (including a Swahili translation of *My Dear Bottle*), reprint the best-selling works several times, and publish four books by other Kenyan authors who had similar stories to tell. By the middle of 1976 Comb Books had expanded to a staff of seven or eight full-time employees occupying two stories of an office building in downtown Nairobi, and nearly all the technical aspects of book production — from type-setting on modern IBM machinery to designing of multi-coloured jackets — were being handled in-house. Maillu made such an impact on the East African book world that other publishers rushed to emulate his example, introducing their own series of romantic novelettes and long-winded lyrical ruminations, often with photographs or drawings of sexy-looking girls on the covers. It was clear from this frantic competition that Comb Books had been a hair-raising success.

But Maillu's fortunes changed rather abruptly in 1976. First, in June that year, his books were banned in Tanzania, so he lost his major

'foreign' market to the south. Political instability in Ethiopia and economic chaos in Uganda under Idi Amin had already robbed him of export opportunities on other borders, so just as his publishing house was beginning to grow and expand, the potential market for his books was contracting. However, by this time, encouraged by his early successes, he was printing a minimum of ten thousand copies of each new book he wrote, and his reprint runs sometimes went as high as thirty thousand copies. Eventually he over-extended himself, and the pyramid came crashing down. He published no books in 1977, and the only titles to appear under the Comb Books imprint in 1978 were *English Punctuation* and *English Spelling and Words Frequently Confused*, which he had put together under the pseudonym of Vigad G. Mulila. His creditors sued him, forced him into bankruptcy, closed down his Nairobi office, and seized his business property, auctioning it off in September 1978 to pay a portion of the 700,000 shillings (about \$100,000) he still owed them. Comb Books, a bold experiment in popular publishing, thus died in its sixth year.

But Mailla has not remained silent since then. Under a new imprint, David Mailla Publishers Ltd., he has recently brought out three new books of his own and has reissued a 1975 Comb Books title he supposedly co-authored with a prostitute. He has also published two novels in the Macmillan Pacesetters series, has a third in press, and has a very long fourth novel (ca. 600-720 pages) completed and under consideration in London. In addition, he has finished a novelette that he hopes will help to raise 'a few million shillings' for the Koola Town Self-Help and Community Development Scheme near his hometown of Machakos; he has invited Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi to write a foreword for this book. Mailla reports that he is currently busy writing an epic of Akamba life covering the period from 1800 to 1981, a volume that might turn out to be twice as long as the most ambitious work he has attempted so far.¹ The author who began his literary career with popular mini-novels in 1973 is thus turning his hand to giant blockbusters eight years later.

What happens to a writer's work when he can no longer publish all of his own books and therefore must submit some of his manuscripts to a foreign publisher? What happens to his work when harsh economic realities force him to choose very carefully what he himself is going to risk scarce capital to publish? What happens, in other words, when a totally free creative spirit is placed under constraints he has never before experienced? Does he express himself in a different way? Does he deal with different themes, different situations, different characters, different ideas? Or does he resort to the familiar formulas that have won him his

reputation, seeking thereby to repeat earlier successes? David Maillu, a self-made literary phenomenon who went from pop to bust and is now trying to float a second career balloon in rough weather, provides an interesting case study of the popular artist under pressure. What strategies has he employed to survive?

When Maillu first appeared on the East African literary scene, he introduced an innovation that no other writer in his part of the world had exploited so fully: he talked dirty. True, Charles Mangua had done this a little earlier in Kenya in two extremely popular novels, *Son of Woman* (1971) and *A Tail in the Mouth* (1972), but Mangua wrote humorous picaresque tales in which a street-wise hero talked tough and dirty. Maillu may have learned something from Mangua, but his own civil servant heroes were not roughshod rogues but middle-class victims of biological urges that ultimately destroyed their careers; they talked weak and dirty. For instance, here is the way *Unfit for Human Consumption* begins:

Jonathan Kinama, civil servant in the Republic of Kenya, waited in the bank, at the counter, teller No. 2. His insides burnt with impatience, much impatience, for his two months salary. It was pay day, the end of the month April 1972. The bank was full of customers, men and women, and at such a time one had to wait for a very long time. The bank had assumed a strange smell, a blend of cigarette smoke, and cheap and expensive local and exotic perfumes. And there was smell of sex, especially from some of the women who had come to the bank hurrying through the hot morning. However, such sex smell could only be detected by some experts like Jonathan Kinama who had great experience in women. There were women of all sizes, from the tallest to the shortest, from the most beautiful to the ugliest.

Kinama decided to keep himself busy while waiting by looking at the women. There were many pretty women to entertain him, most of them modern looking, impressively smart with straightened hair, some wearing Afro American wigs. All of them carried expensive handbags of cheetah skin, zebra, lion, and plastic. This was the scene of the modern African woman. Kinama's eyes rested on one girl, yes, that one — a fat girl armed with huge breasts, and highly pronounced buttocks, obviously soft and comfortable, luxurious. There was something more of great interest about her. Her legs. Thickly set legs, beautiful of course, and enthusiastically polished by nature in chocolate brown. And she protected them in the latest fashion of stockings. A bird that fitted too well in her mini dress, a mahogany mini which matched very well with her body. Kinama calculated in his mind and passed her as a sexy bird.

Her eyes met his and he quickly looked away pretending that he had not been looking at her. But not before he had managed to have a glance at her lips: full lips which seduced his for a kiss. He licked his lips. She was unaware that he had been studying her. Now she fell into conversation with a thin girl, nail-hard looking. They talked in English and the accent which came from the thin girl sounded doubtfully local. He studied the thin girl and found himself thinking, 'How would a man hold this one?' But his eyes went back to the fat one in spite of the attractive accent of the

this one which was putting more value in her. Kinama's ideal girl for sex satisfaction and romance was a plump girl with shoulders that arched nicely and intoxicating breasts like those ones. He could hardly take his eyes from her. He waded through the crowd till he came to a good position where he could see her face well. 'Hif he thought, then he sighed.

'Man, this one,' he thought, 'this one is very much fit for human consumption! He began wondering what man on earth enjoyed her.

'Delicious! He thought and began surveying her legs, then her hips and ... Just there! He thought and his penis began rising. (pp 5-7)

Kinama, a middle-class tragic hero, does not rise very high before he suffers a middle-class fall, losing his job because he cannot control his desire for sex and alcohol. Distraught, he commits suicide.

It was this kind of story — the soap opera of civil servant self-destruction — that Maillu made his own in his first mini-novels and long poems. Sometimes he would focus on men, sometimes on women (usually working women — secretaries, schoolgirls, prostitutes and the like), but his stories seldom ended happily. The protagonist would have to suffer for having over-indulged in the fleeting pleasures of the bed or bottle, pleasures which Maillu paused to describe in elaborate and sexy detail. Some of his detractors called such writing pornography, but it would be classified as rather innocuous softcore material on the bookshelves of any western drugstore or supermarket, including those in Nairobi. Yet in East Africa no one before Maillu had written about such matters in quite the same way, with so much attention focused on the physiological and psychological dimensions of erotic and dipsomaniac behaviour. It was no doubt this unusual 'frankness', as Maillu terms it,² that won him so many readers. He talked dirty in a new way.

If we compare Maillu's latest works with those he wrote and published during Comb Books' brief heyday, one change becomes apparent immediately: the dirty talk is gone. His heroes may be sexually active but they are not sexually obsessed, and their physical interactions with members of the opposite sex tend to be described with restraint, even reticence. This is true not only in the two novels he has published in the Macmillan Pacesetter Series, *For Mbatha and Rabeka* (1980) and *The Equatorial Assignment* (1980), but also in *Kadosa* (1979), the first novel brought out by David Maillu Publishers Ltd., and in 'Tears at Sunset', the yet unpublished novel written for the Koola Town Self-Help and Community Development Scheme. Moreover, carnal love has no place in *Jese Kristo* (1979), a morality play performed at the Kenya National Theatre in October and November of 1979 and published in the programme prepared for that production, or in *Hit of Love* (1980), a

one-hundred page poem issued by David Maillu Publishers Ltd. in a bilingual (English-Kikamba) format. The only exception or throwback to Maillu's earlier sexy style of writing is *The Flesh: Part One* (1979), a poem about prostitution purportedly written in Kikamba by Jasinta Mote and translated, edited, 'produced', and reprinted by Maillu after having been originally published by Comb Books in 1975. Since *The Flesh: Part One* belongs to an earlier phase in Maillu's career and may have been composed to some degree by someone else, it will not be considered here except as an example of what is produced by a hard-pressed softcore publisher returning to old tricks of the trade. Perhaps Maillu needed a proven bread-and-butter (or bed-and-better) title to get his new publishing venture off the ground. His previous experience in the popular book business would have taught him that prostitution sells.

But such pandering to prurient interests was not the sort of thing that an established British publisher would be likely to be eager to include in its own popular series. Every Macmillan Pacesetter contains the following policy statement: 'All the novels in the Macmillan Pacesetter series deal with contemporary issues and problems in a way that is particularly designed to interest young adults, although the stories are such that they will appeal to all ages.' The initial titles in the series are indicative of the pace Macmillan hoped to set: *The Smugglers*, *The Delinquent*, *The Betrayer*, *The Hopeful Lovers*, *Bloodbath at Lobster Claws*. Clearly the emphasis was meant to be on formulaic fiction — stories of mystery, adventure, and romance. Young adults interested primarily in raw sex would have to seek their literary thrills elsewhere.

Maillu's success in adapting to new popular formulas is evident in the first two Pacesetters he has written. *For Mbatha and Rabeka* is built on a classic love triangle. Mbatha, an idealistic primary-school teacher, is planning to marry Rabeka, his beautiful childhood sweetheart who teaches at the same village school, but while she is in Nairobi recovering from a liver ailment, she meets Honeycomb Mawa, a Panel Beater Foreman with Bodyliners Limited, who shows her the town in his Saab sportscar, wining and dining her at all the top establishments in the Rift Valley and escorting her to high-class international parties. Rabeka, dazzled by the urban glitter and impressed by Mawa's sophistication and wealth, begins to long for life in the fast lane:

As soon as she returned to Kilindi, she noticed how primitive things were and how many essentials of living were missing. To start with, she saw how poor life was in the country. Then the list continued: there were no entertainment centres, no television, no high class hotels, no cinemas, no good transport facilities, no hairdressers,

no newspapers, no bookshops or libraries, no intellectuals with whom to discuss serious subjects, not to mention how far this place was from the city of international communication. (p. 99)

Mbatha, distressed by Rabeka's new materialistic outlook and heart-broken when she leaves him with the intention of marrying Mawa, has a mental breakdown that puts him in an asylum for six weeks. But the story ends happily when Mawa, unable to raise a substantial loan to cover his marriage expenses, fails to turn up for his own wedding, and Rabeka, embarrassed and tired of waiting, agrees to run off that same afternoon with her dependable old beau. Village virtue thus wins out over big-city flashiness.

The story moves rapidly, and several vividly sketched minor characters add humour and variety to a fairly conventional romantic plot. Maillu, in bringing his lovers together, does not omit erotic encounters entirely, but most of the heavy-breathing action takes place in bedrooms or river-banks offstage. The most intimate scene described is one in which Rabeka and Mawa, forced to share a guestroom in her uncle's Nairobi apartment, huddle together at night under a single blanket in order to keep warm. Unable to sleep, they leave the light on and talk for a while:

Later, sleep overcame her and she blotted out, leaving him still brightly awake. He turned slowly and faced her in that semi-back position she lay. He studied her calm face that had now been taken over by the innocence of sleep. Her kissable lips lay loosely, very tempting ... he felt her clear clean breath gently breezing over his face. He liked the way she breathed; he admired her nose, her eyelashes, that chin, those cheeks, all of which were given a fine finish by the pretty mouth — those lips again. Between her lips, her milk-white teeth half showed ... She smelt nice. He brought his mouth closely to hers, so that she breathed straight into his nostrils, not a sinking breath, but a living one; one though not fresh, was refreshing, challenging, feminine. Slowly, he placed his arm over her bosom, doing his best not to awaken her. His hand lay just below her breasts.

'Your highness,' he called much, much later.

'Yes,' her eyes flew open, being sensitive to the light.

'I can't sleep.'

'I'm sorry, I can't keep awake much more ... What can I do for you to make you sleep for a while before we wake up?' She felt his hand across her bosom and didn't object.

'I guess nothing you can do.'

'Put off the light and try to sleep, please.'

He reached the switch and put off the light then returned the hand back. She turned her back to him, took his hand and put it under her arm and, how daring! now put it over her breast as if she thought that was the only favour she could extend to him. 'Please, for my sake, try to sleep.'

And he *did* sleep, though after a long time. (pp.78-9)

The difference between the Pacesetter Maillu and the earlier sex-pacer Maillu is quite clear if we compare this kind of titillation with what comes to hand in any Comb Book. Here, for example, is an excerpt from *Troubles* in which a secretary, trying to win a promotion, meets her boss after hours in the office to feed him fish and chips and, in the process, arouse another of his appetites:

He looked at her greedily as if she was a piece of nicely roasted chicken which he wanted to eat. Ema took everything easily, advancing by degrees. If things went on the way they looked, she thought, then she knew that she was on the right path to the promotion. He began kneading her breasts and her eyes began responding. He kissed her lips, pulling her more to himself. They looked at each other, smiled, then when he kissed her this time, she gave him all her long tongue to suck on. He did it passionately, eating all the bits of chips on the tongue. She writhed in his hands. When he released her a little bit, she folded up the paper and put aside the chips, then pushed all her breasts to him. And he knew what to do with them ... He kissed and sucked on her firm breasts, shattering her and triggering off her vagina powerfully excited and making it begin chewing his lips and trying to swallow them. He took a glance at the gloss black hair chatching her vagina.

'Ohooo, Ohooo, Oho-o!' She cried as his pole drove into her lively flesh. She arched her hips up and up to meet him, hastening his powerful warm thing into a full swallow — complete homecoming ... He knew too well how to drive a woman mad with it, building her up into a crashing climax. Now he took to another style, sucking and twirling her nipples. That amplified her crying, sometimes her breath locking up and storming out. Now he added his finger to twirling her clitoris. She squirmed, twisted, scratched the floor, and hit his legs with her heels. And when he began racing for the finals, she joined with a savage reaction and a saxophone note leaped her anus. Her orgasm span to the gaze synchronizing with his. Maillu began puffing out like a monster and just before they reached their climax, the telephone rang! But they hastened, punching each other wildly until the climax outbreak seemingly. (pp. 112-7)

One doubts that a publisher such as Macmillan would have allowed its offices to be used to promote such creative work.

Maillu's second Pacesetter, *The Equatorial Assignment*, was an African adaptation of the James Hadley Chase type of thriller. Benni Kamba, Secret Agent 009 working for the National Integrity Service of Africa (NISA), is pitted against beautiful Konolulu, known professionally as Colonel Swipta, an agent for a multinational European organization intent on destabilizing Africa for the benefit of the Big Powers. NISA has its headquarters at a Saharan desert outpost run by the brainy Dr Triplo, and Colonel Swipta works at a mountain station called Chengolama Base run by the unscrupulous and equally brilliant Dr Thunder. Benni Kamba's mission is to infiltrate Chengolama Base and destroy it before Dr Thunder can launch his secret weapon, a missile called

Thundercrust that would obliterate NISA. Agent 009 accomplishes this by making romantic overtures to Colonel Swipta, killing her after gaining her trust, and then detonating the Thundercrust on its launching pad, thereby destroying Chengolama Base. The good guys win; the bad guys die.

The action-packed plot of this adventure story includes a kidnapping, a high-speed car chase, an assassination attempt, a submarine manoeuvre, a spying mission, a helicopter getaway, an airplane pursuit, several dastardly betrayals, and countless explosions and murders. Moreover, it is all good, clean fun, with cunning and courage triumphing over might and malice. The earthiest episodes, Benni Kamba's few tumblers with Konolulu, are handled playfully rather than pornographically:

They spent the night together in Kamba's flat. Very early the next morning, they swam far out to sea together. Obviously this girl was a powerful swimmer too.

As they swam round each other, rising and falling with the waves, Kamba thought she was funny in bed. He remembered the manner in which she had coiled and uncoiled, then made that single and final brief cry. 'Ijjahal'...

They swam closely.

'You know what?' she said. 'I'm swimming naked, come and feel me.'

He passed his hand over her breasts, then down there.

'Beware of the small fish.' (pp.34-5)

This is light fiction written with a light touch. Unlike *For Mbatha and Rabeka*, *The Equatorial Assignment* does not deal with semi-serious social issues or with real people in recognizable situations. It is escape literature pure and simple, an indigenous variant of an extremely popular foreign genre. Benni Kamba is an African James Bond.

The books Mailla himself has published in recent years are no saltier than those he has published with Macmillan, but they tend to reflect other facets of his personality as a writer. In the play *Jesus Kristo* he sets the story of Jesus Christ in a modern African state, the Republic of Savannah, in order to explore a number of related political and theological notions. The historical analogy enables him to comment on injustice, tyranny, violence, and the persecution of innocent and upright people in contemporary Africa in a dramatic context that his audience could not fail to understand. This is satire with provocative symbolic punch.

In the bilingual poem *Hû of Lowe*, Mailla meditates on the nature of love, asking such questions as 'Why do I live at all, and for what?', 'Does love find or is love found?', 'Do I love you or am I made to love you?'.

'Does love regret?', 'Can love be counted in terms of profits and gains?', 'Who is responsible for what I feel?', 'How do I fit in the solar system of your life?' This restless questioning is not unlike the compulsive talkativeness in some of his early long poems, especially the garrulous *The Koman Man*, which comes in three volumes and runs to nearly 850 pages. Mailla's keen interest in philosophy and 'the moral side of life' achieves expression in this kind of contemplative verse.

A more pragmatic love problem is the theme of Mailla's unpublished community development novel, 'Tears at Sunset'. A beautiful young woman (with the unlikely name of Swastika Nziwele) has married a hard-working young man, Silvesta Maweu, whose family home is in the dry hill country of central Kenya. Unfortunately, his work as a bank accountant keeps him far away at the coast most of the year, and Swastika is left upcountry with the responsibility not only of maintaining their homestead and farm but also of caring for his eighty-year-old mother, Kalunde. At first the two women get along well, but their relationship deteriorates when Kalunde criticizes Swastika for throwing a dinner party and dance one night during her husband's absence. Worse yet, Swastika takes up — and occasionally takes off — with a married neighbour, Simon Mosi, who owns a large farm across the river. When Silvesta returns home unexpectedly and finds her gone, he is furious, but his mother and the village pastor calm him down, and he and Swastika are reunited momentarily. However, as soon as he goes away again, Swastika backslides into unwifely behaviour, seeing too much of Simon and too little of her ailing mother-in-law. She even poisons the family dog so he will not bark when Simon pays his evening visits. The next time Silvesta comes home, he thrashes her soundly and threatens to kill her. She leaves and it appears that their marriage is broken, but he still loves her, misses her, and eventually tries to get her back. When Kalunde dies, Swastika returns to him and they live happily ever after in the highlands, raising three children and building up their farm by constructing a big dam and employing modern methods of irrigation. What had been dry and barren is cultivated at last and bears healthy fruit.

Mailla touches upon a number of topical matters in this story, not the least of which is the plight of the mateless married woman in rural society. Swastika's problem is that she feels bored and unfulfilled living alone upcountry. As she says in a long letter to Silvesta after their break-up,

I think I just found myself very lonely, or afraid of myself, and I just got involved. Country life has many problems. A whole barren world in which you find yourself in

no other company but that of village and little educated women. I am not trying to argue that I am better than they are, but it is that they and I belong to different worlds. You will probably think that I am talking a lot of nonsense.

I think I have one great problem, call it weakness. I can't exist like that without doing anything. That is, I feel that I must engage myself or be occupied by something concrete. Not just trying to supervise some labourers digging coffee holes or making terraces. I need something more than that.

After your duty in Mombasa, you can stroll around, doing some window-shopping or sight seeing, or go for a swim or to watch the sea as I know you like doing, or see a movie. But what do I have in Kyandumbi or at Koola Town? I am sure I am not the only person seeing it that way. Until there are facilities in a place like that, you can expect worse things from younger people.

In the old days, people were kept busy by their social activities — dances, communal celebrations for circumcisions and childbirths, initiations, participation in clan affairs, looking after the livestock and large families, and so on. What have [we] today in that place?

Nothing, absolutely nothing.

And yet, one is expected to live there happily. It is a nice place, but it lacks other things. The desert looks very beautiful, with all those sand dunes, and so on, as you might have seen in films; but no one would like to live in it, because it lacks other factors that are essential to life. Of course, I am not trying to liken Koola to the desert, but I am sure you know what I am trying to say. The place doesn't lack water alone, but many other things. I would love to live in a place like that, in the country, if there were other things to occupy my mind.

I don't know whether you can connect this with my behaviour. Had I been a teacher or something, maybe my time there would have been less boring. I didn't love that *Most* the way you thought. It was a problem deeper than that, and I have great doubt whether you will ever understand it. There is nothing I am trying to justify about the whole involvement. It goes without question that it was immoral behaviour ... That was also the cause of my disagreement with your mother. It would be good for me to simply say that I got messed up ... A friend of mine once told me that even paradise would be boring without some form of occupation. (pp. 84-5 of unpublished typescript)

It is apparent from Swastika's astute effort at self-analysis that her problem is rather different from that of Rabeka in *For Mbatha and Rabeka*. She is not attracted by the gaudy tinsel of city life or the smooth talk of fast men. She simply needs a productive outlet for her energy, something intellectually engaging that will keep her stimulated and busy.

Mailu evidently perceives such environmentally induced ennui to be a major source of unhappiness and social disorder in contemporary Africa, for he returns to this theme again and again in his writings. In the introduction to *Jese Kristo* he remarks that

Most of the adults in Africa today are standing face to face with the devil of 'having nothing to do after work, and having nothing for entertainment' ... Most of the heavy drinking that is invading the country says that something is seriously wrong

somewhere. When man lacks the means of recreation, he turns to drinking, sex, and crime.... There is so much mental hunger in this country that one wonders what could be done to, at least, cut it down by fifty percent. In Western worlds, there are theatres, clubs, sports, dances, films, television, books — the list is long — available to everyone. In our worlds, these are for a few individuals, the élite. For the mass and the common man, there is the bottle and the woman and the mouth. It is not surprising that our countries have the highest birth rates in the world.... The common man has hardly any chances of educating himself beyond where the teacher left him. Food alone is not enough to sustain the human life. (pp. 4, 16)

Mailu the moralist, Mailu the practical psychologist, Mailu the homespun philosopher, Mailu the comedian, Mailu the popular publisher, tries to provide the kind of stimulating entertainment that will satisfy the mental hunger of his people and thereby help to sustain 'the human life' in Kenya.

Perhaps the most encouraging sign of Mailu's growth as a creative artist has been his willingness to experiment with new forms and new ideas. Instead of continuing to churn out only one type of literature, he has moved in a number of different directions simultaneously, dabbling in drama as well as fiction and poetry, and trying his hand at everything from spy thrillers and domestic melodramas to religio-political satire and meditative verse. But his most remarkable piece of writing since the demise of Comb Books must certainly be the first book he published in the David Mailu Publishers Library series launched in 1979, a novel called *Kadosa*, which the author himself terms his 'most favourite work'.³

Kadosa is a blend of romance, adventure, science fiction, metaphysical speculation, and hallucinogenic horror. It concerns a love affair between Dr Mutava, a scholar returning to Kenya to complete a study of 'African Mythology and Apparition', and a mysterious supernatural creature named Kadosa who is herself an apparition. Kadosa possesses immense powers, including the ability to transform herself at will into anything visible or invisible. She treats Mutava to terrifying displays of her total control over the bodies and minds of human beings, injuring and even killing those who annoy her. She also rules Mutava's imagination, filling his dreams and other unconscious moments with horrific sights that nearly drive him mad. Mutava calls in another scientist from Switzerland to study her, but the old professor flees after Kadosa turns his head coal black. Mutava, despite all his qualms and traumas, finds himself powerfully attracted to this phenomenal *femme fatale*, and he is genuinely sorry when she ultimately is called back to another world. She leaves him pondering the illusory demarcation between being and unbeing.

This was, in many senses, a fantastic way for Maillu to begin his second literary career. *Kadosa* was utterly unlike anything he had written before. For one thing, there was no sex in it; the love affair between Mutava and Kadosa was absolutely platonic, with the primary point of focus throughout being on marvels of fantasy rather than matters of physiology. *Kadosa* literally took the reader to another world. The boldness of Maillu's conception may be sampled in any of the uncanny nightmares that haunt this book. Here, for instance, is one of Dr Mutava's hallucinations in a movie theatre:

The screen flipped and instantly another scene came. Someone stood by a very large gate; he was dressed in white, but a red cap was on his head. A stethoscope hung round his neck. He wore red shoes. The walls of the house he was seen in faded out into a grey darkness and I could not see properly what was beyond the grey darkness. The door next to which this man stood was, like the gate, very wide. I looked carefully at him and came to the conclusion that he was a doctor.... From his left, I saw a long line of women advancing towards the doctor. And on coming close to him, each bent, uncovered her bottom and the doctor pushed an injection into her quickly, then she passed. There were women of all sizes and of all races. The doctor acted very quickly on them, throwing glances here and there as if he were afraid of being seen by anyone. But just as soon as each patient passed the doctor, she began to wail and writhe in pain.

That scene passed quickly and I saw the women come out from another opening into the building. And upon entering a large parkour, they dropped onto the floor and blood began to pour out from them as they wailed and writhed in pain. Some of them lay in the pools of blood as if they were dead. But on the left-hand side of the house, another person who looked like a doctor, but this time wearing a green cap and green shoes, stood there with a long knife and each time a pregnant woman passed by him, he stabbed her in the stomach and took out the child and while the child was still kicking in his hands, he threw it out through a window and left blood-stains running down the wall. Then that woman would fall down immediately and she would wail and writhe in the agony of the pain like all the others. After this scene, the screen faded into something else: there was a big heap which, when I tried to find out what it was, I discovered that it was composed of dead babies, some still kicking with a bit of life in them, others who had only been a few months old before they were delivered... (pp. 60-1)

This vividly visualized horror is followed by other cinematographic sequences equally intense. Maillu, in delving so deeply into morbid zones of the imagination, was breaking new ground in African fiction. *Kadosa* was the first Kenyan novel to explore the surreal mysteries of the occult.

Literary critics have not been very generous in their assessments of Maillu's work. No one has lavished praise on him, and few have admitted finding any redeeming value in what or how he writes. The general feeling among serious academics appears to be that such literature is

beneath criticism for it is wholly frivolous, the assumption being that a scholar should not waste his time on art that aims to be truly popular. Yet Mailla cannot be ignored in any systematic effort to understand the evolution of an East African literature, for he has extended the frontiers of that literature farther than any other single writer. One may regard his writing as undisciplined, unrefined, uncouth, and outrageously excessive, but it is precisely because he has been spectacularly audacious and unmannerly that he is important. He has broken most of the rules of good writing and has got away with it, thereby releasing an embryonic literary culture from the confining sac of conformity to established conventions of taste and judgement. Mailla, a primitive pioneer and intrepid trailblazer, has liberated fenced-off aesthetic territory. Now that he has pushed the boundaries of decorum back, others can stake out their own claims in the same untamed wilderness.

Moreover, Mailla is important because he possesses tenacity and resourcefulness. He has learned to survive by adjusting to new circumstances and imposing his will on the world about him. He has taken risks that the prudent would have eschewed and has discovered through trial and error, as well as trial and success, just how far he can carry others with him. One has to admire his courage both as a publisher and as an author. Perhaps no one else would have persisted so long in the struggle when buffeted continually by criticism that everything he produced was unfit for human consumption.

NOTES

1. Letter from David Mailla to Bernib Lindfors dated 18 September 1981.
2. 'Interview with David Mailla', *Mumungumoo: Interviews with East African Writers, Publishers, Editors and Scholars*, ed. Bernib Lindfors (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, Africa Program, 1988), p. 66.
3. Written on title page of presentation copy of *Kidusa* given by David Mailla to Bernib Lindfors.

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The Year That Was

AUSTRALIA

The two outstanding Australian books of the year are autobiographies, but they're even farther apart than their respective origins in Sydney and Perth.

No doubt for many readers one of the disappointments of Patrick White's 'long awaited' *Flaws in the Glass* (Jonathan Cape) was the absence of an index. Potential victims and bystanders, salivating alike, will find no list of 'name' targets of this sharpest of Australian writers who admits he forgets nothing: no more than a few perfunctory and occasionally parodic footnotes.

White has been hardest, after all, on himself. *Flaws in the Glass* is a painfully honest series of overlapping impressions rather than a conventional narrative. Sometimes a sad little book without the grand energy of the novels ('long awaited' by whom?), it's nevertheless compulsive reading; the inevitable successor to *The Twyborn Affair*.

Bende White's record of the artist's 'difficult business of living in Australia', A.B. Facey's relatively artless *A Fortunate Life* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press/ Penguin) reads like a found poem. Bert Facey was 87 in 1981 when this, his only book, was published. He lived just long enough to see it acclaimed unanimously and quite without sentimentality. Centring on his experiences in the bush and at war, this is a tough book and at times a horrifying one in its details of an ordinary Australian's life. Yet Facey can say in conclusion, 'I have lived a very good life, it has been very rich and full. I have been very fortunate and I am thrilled by it when I look back.' *A Fortunate Life* is an outstanding book in any year and, with illustrations by Robert Juniper in both its editions, a fine example of Australian book production.

The year's best novel, *Bliss* (UQP), is the first by short fiction writer Peter Carey. 'Harry Joy was to die three times, but it was his first death which was to have the greatest effect on him.' Recovering from death Harry Joy becomes obsessed by the notion that he has entered Hell. The idea at first seems familiar, but the treatment is unique. Carey wisely avoids the hit-and-run surrealism of his short fiction and slowly develops

a vision unsettling in its ordinariness. At times, it's like a childhood picture-puzzle: what's wrong in this picture?

If *Bflu* is somewhat compromised by its neo-romantic Whole Earth ending, the problem of endings is one it shares with the year's other noteworthy novels, among them David Ireland's *City of Women* (Penguin). Here, Ireland evokes a city of the future very much like Sydney, and peopled entirely by women. Or so it seems. But where do you go after a vision like that? Ireland only just gets away with his and-then-I-woke-and-found-it-was-all-a-dream conclusion.

City of Women may strike some readers as simply a female version of *The Glass Canoe* (now republished with *The Fleasheaters* by Penguin), and they may see it, in that respect and coming as it does after *A Woman of the Future*, as Ireland parodying himself. But it's an interesting novel, particularly in Ireland's questioning of his art and of the efficacy of language: concerns of his fiction right from the beginning but seldom given their due prominence in comments on his work.

Another writer grappling with the problems of fantastic vision, Patricia Wrightson in *Behind the Wind* (Hutchinson) completes her Wirrun trilogy, a beautifully written evocation of the young Aborigine who lives half in the spirit world as Ice Fighter and Hero. It would be difficult to cap the grim power of the previous novel *The Dark Bright Water* — the real climax of the trilogy — and, however good, *Behind the Wind* doesn't manage that. Yet Wrightson has taken high fantasy, children's writing, and the Jindyworobaks' ideals further than anyone else has dared and for those reasons alone the books would be compelling.

Blanche d'Alpuget's award-winning *Turtle Beach* (Penguin) is what Thomas Keneally says Australian critics seem to fear, a good solid middle-range novel: neither a Nobel Prize winner nor a filler for airport bookstalls, and with no substantial pretensions either way. D'Alpuget's considerable achievement here is to take a strong Australian female character into Malaysia, to have her meet characters equally strong who expose Australian prejudices, and to evoke a convincing southeast Asian sensibility. The thing is, though, has she got the ending right?

And the problem with endings doesn't end there. *True Love And How To Get It* (UQP) is the first novel by short fiction writer Gerard Lee, the funniest Australian writer since Thea Astley and Barry Oakley. Here the deadpan manner of his naïve male characters satirises Okkers, suburbia, the bean sprout culture and True Romance. But an only partly justified split between some powerful racy material and a heavily italicised intrusive narrator suggests that Lee is tussling with a form that doesn't suit him as well as it does Peter Carey. It's finally the sense of the place

Brisbane that makes the episodes of *True Love And How To Get It* cohere where they do. Always entertaining, but whether it quite makes a novel is no new question to readers of the new literatures in English.

Moonlute (Macmillan), David Foster's award-winning novel, occasionally pretentious but with an intriguing Scots setting, *Hal Porter's* new collection *The Clairvoyant Goat* (Nelson) and welcome reprints of Christina Stead's *A Little Tea A Little Chat* and one of her most accessible novels, *The People with the Dogs* (both Virago) complete the year's essential reading in fiction and non-fiction.

For all the talk of a publishing slump, the year's poetry fares equally well. The most widely discussed volume is *The Collins Book of Australian Poetry* (Collins) edited by Rodney Hall. It comes with a good deal of hype about reevaluation, an authoritative dark brown dustjacket and a thirty dollar price tag.

Given the superb production, the book is probably worth the price as a gift, and the first edition sold out smartly. But it adds little to the serious student's understanding of Australian poetry. Rodney Hall has been one of Australia's most important poetry editors in recent years and I'm interested that he says he read 700 books of poetry over several years in selecting for this anthology. But I simply don't believe that the editorial process he describes would inevitably come up with, as he does, 9 poems by Geoffrey Lehmann say, and 5 by Les Murray or Randolph Stow. Such an anthology has no more right to make demands of our time than any other. Selections of work by the major poets are quite unsatisfactory due to the editor's understandable but misguided wish to avoid familiar anthology pieces. An anthology tells us more about the anthologist than about his or her subject, and this one is no exception.

The *Collins Book* will be remembered only for its higher than usual proportion of Aboriginal poetry: a distinction worthy enough but rather more modest than its publishers and editor have claimed.

Far more distinctive is Rodney Hall's own new collection, *The Most Beautiful World* (UQP). The theatrical manner of Hall's poetry, though impressive, often keeps the reader at a considerable distance and there's a tacit recognition here of the problems which that manner can entail, in the poet's awareness of his own range. The poems separate into two distinct voices: those in a declamatory manner, 'the sermons'; and those in a more intimate, vernacular voice, 'the fictions'. The fictions in particular are unusually appealing, as are the musical arrangement of the five suites and the offbeat sense of humour.

A.D. Hope finds a wonderful image in the at first puzzling title of his

new collection, *Antechinus* (A & R). Three footnotes tell us with some pleasure that *Antechinus* is a predatory, forest-dwelling marsupial, a carnivore about the size of a mouse that mates during the spring in Canberra, and can take 'between five and twelve hours over a single act of coitus'.

Hope hardly needs a poem after that, but the title poem is a good one and part of a privately printed collection, *The Drifting Continent* (1977, Brindabella Press) reproduced here for a wider audience. This collection drew together Hope's poems with specific Australian reference, and with other pieces in *Antechinus* demonstrates unexpectedly that in late career his poetic concerns and Judith Wright's have tended to converge.

New books by Geoffrey Lehmann, *Nero's Poems* (A & R), and Gwen Harwood, *The Lion's Bride* (A & R), move in directions already strongly established in their work, though Gwen Harwood's continued exploration of the power of art is made more urgent here by a sometimes overwhelming consciousness of death, signalled by repeated references to the death of James McAuley.

R.A. Simpson's *Selected Poems* (UQP) is a welcome opportunity to review a poet who, apart from his prominence in Alexander Craig's standard *Twelve Poets* anthology, is often overlooked. Simpson's combination of a simple diction, hard-edge domestic imagery and surreal vision is appealing, though it can risk slightness, and would be interesting to set beside the work of Robert Gray.

The year's best new poet is Susan Hampton. Her *Costumes* (Transit Poetry/ Wild & Woolley) shows hers to be a poetry of male and female. It's tough and ironic and its inclination to break into straight narrative is supported here by the inclusion of three prose pieces. They're interesting enough and Hampton seems to have been, like a number of poets, turning to prose fiction recently (there's more money in it) but her real strength is in the poems, and the promise of her earlier selection in the *Sisters I* anthology (Sisters Publishing Ltd) is clearly fulfilled in this first solo flight.

Sad to report that with still only one major publisher interested and many of the playwrights themselves working on scripts for our lively film and television industry, the publishing of Australian plays is at a low. And although the publication of good new plays by Ron Blair, Dorothy Hewett and Stephen Sewell must be on the horizon, only two appearances are worth noting in 1981; Thomas Keneally's *Bullie's Howe* (Currency), a play that has refuelled arguments over Keneally's portrayal of Aboriginal culture, and Louis Nowra's double bill *Inside the Island/ The Precious Woman* (Currency). Both plays are outstanding examples

of the Australian theatre's movement away from naturalism and it's particularly good to have *Inside the Island* in print. In dealing with the eruption of catastrophic violence in the unreal silence of an enclosed community, Nowra touches a sensitive Australian nerve. A man three seats in front of me ran from the theatre halfway through the second act, screaming 'GARBAGE GARBAGE GARBAGE GARBAGE', and at the discussion with the writer and director after the performance, Nowra was savaged repeatedly for insulting the audience's intelligence. 'This couldn't happen in Australia,' they kept telling him. 'Why have you hit us over the head with it?' 'I can't believe in a woman as evil as Lillian Dawson.'

Read these plays. Nowra's metaphors are absolutely central.

And finally two critical studies. Verna Coleman's rather awkward title *Her Unknown (Brilliant) Career* (A & R) is followed by some lack of sophistication in literary criticism, but beyond it is a useful account of Miles Franklin's hidden years in America. To some extent a companion, and better, book Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home* (A & R) at last collects work she has been doing in recent years on Australian writers who are women. Her documentation is good, her study of minor figures such as Brennan's daughter Anne, and more central figures such as Franklin, equally interesting. The real frustration is that Modjeska necessarily selects the writers who most clearly support her thesis.

I want to keep asking but what about Baynton, and Richardson, and Langley... And I'm not sure that I can accept the implication that that's another story.

MARK MACLEOD

CANADA

1981 began with some surprises. George Bowering's *Burning Water* (Musson), very loosely based on the life of George Vancouver, won the 1980 Governor General's Award for fiction, thereby sparking innumerable debates about the value of the award and the nature of fiction in Canada. Because I had found this novel pretentious and derivative in its experimentation, I had decided against mentioning it in last year's summary. The awarding of the prize for poetry to Stephen Scobie's excellent *McAlmon's Chinese Opera* surprised for different reasons: *Opera's* publisher was a new small press, Quadrant, established by the

poet Gary Geddes to sell new books by subscription only. Quadrant brought out four new books in 1981, all of them attractively produced and interesting reading: a collection of poetry by Martin Reyto, *The Cloned Mammoth*; a collection of stories, *Matinee Daily*, edited by Terence Byrnes; *Dead Ends*, a novel by Keith Harrison; and a selection of George Woodcock's letters to Canadian writers compiled to 'show with an inner eye something of the literary community in Canada as it exists in human terms' and entitled *Taking It to the Letter*. Such a venture bodes well for the future of new writing in Canada.

1981 in general was a buoyant and exciting year for literature, if for little else. Poetry dominated the spring lists, with Margaret Atwood, Al Purdy, Irving Layton, Phyllis Webb, and Patrick Lane bringing out new collections. *True Stories* (Oxford) is Atwood at her most painful and political. As the title poem announces:

The true story is vicious
and multiple and untrue
after all,

Exploring these stories, her persona asks:

How can I justify
this gentle poem then in the face of sheer
horror?

The collection presents a series of tentative attempts to answer this question. Purdy's *Stone Bird* (McClelland & Stewart) also expresses distress at the course of civilization, but in the humorous and humble fashion for which he has become known. Lane's romantic stance in *The Measure* (Black Moss) and Layton's aggressive pose in *Europe and Other Bad News* (McClelland & Stewart) are more tediously predictable. Phyllis Webb's long-awaited *Wilson's Bowl* (Coach House) contains an intense, beautifully crafted private poetry born, she says, 'out of great struggles of silence'. Here are fragments of 'The Kropotkin Poems', never completed, 'Letters to Margaret Atwood', and 'Wilson's Bowl' itself, 'in memory of Lilo, who walked into the sea'.

Talonbooks brought out an attractively produced and inexpensive new series of selected poetry and prose by six of what they call the new generation of Canadian poets: Frank Davey's *The Arches*; George Bowering's *Particular Accidents*; bill bissett's *Beyond Even Faithful Legends*; Fred Wah's *Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek*; bp nichol's *As Elected*; and Daphne Marlatt's *Net Work*. These should become indispensable.

(Annoyingly, along with Webb's *Bowl*, they are dated 1980 although they came out in early 1981.) Dorothy Livesay's *The Raw Edges: Voices in Our Time* (Turnstone), Miriam Waddington's *The Vivants*, and P.K. Page's *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies* (both Oxford), demonstrate the continuing vitality of more traditional poetry. Jay McPherson's *Poems Twice Told* (also Oxford) brings her last two books, *The Boatman* and *Welcoming Disaster* – Canadian classics – together in one volume. General Publishing's Spectrum Poetry Series began brilliantly with twin retrospective collections: Eli Mandel's selection, *Dreaming Backwards*, with an introduction by Robert Kroetsch, and Kroetsch's collection, *Field Notes*, with an introduction by Eli Mandel. (Is Canadian poetry really this incestuous? Yes.) We learn that Mandel is 'the America-seeker', a radical landscape poet who dares to become 'the all-journeying shaman' and that Kroetsch is 'an articulate theorist of silence', a story-teller whose poems continue because they cannot end.

These are only the most prominent of an astonishing flood of publications last year. Even more impressive is the list of new fiction. The most outstanding novels by established figures include Marian Engel's *Lunatic Villas*, Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* (both McClelland & Stewart), Robertson Davies' *Rebel Angels*, W.O. Mitchell's *How I Spent My Summer Holidays* (both Macmillan), and Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words* (Clarke Irwin). While each is good, Findley's is most remarkable. At times the sheer brilliance of the writing takes one's breath away, as does the audacity of making the Duke and Duchess of Windsor central characters in a re-writing of history according to Pound's fictional poet, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, who records his version of events on the walls and ceilings of several rooms at an Alpine hotel as he awaits his death. Mauberley's narrative, the opposed readings of it offered by the two Allied soldiers who discover it, and the larger frame of omniscient narration in which these are placed, ensure the complexity of the novel's exploration of human values in a world where the divisions between life and art or truth and fiction are not clearly determined. Where the novel's impressive vision fails is in the triviality of much that Mauberley records. The banality of evil is always difficult to dramatize, but Findley accords it too much space. The verdict: an ambitious failure.

Atwood's *Bodily Harm* appears to be the fictional counterpart of her *True Stories*: an inquiry into the roots of violence and our techniques for avoiding confrontations with its reality. A serious, compelling, and darkly comic novel, *Harm* examines the implications of two of the twentieth century's most popular metaphors for experience: cancer and

tourism. In contrast, Davies' *Rebel Angels* seems slight. Set at a modern university clearly modelled on Toronto, it pretends to consider the university's role in contemporary society (with the professors as 'rebel angels'), through the unfolding of two melodramatic plots narrated alternately by a middle-aged priest and his completely unbelievable female graduate student. It's fun, but not Davies at his best. Engel has also turned to comedy: instead of Davies' bizarrely passionate genteel world, she takes the community life of a middle-class inner city street as her subject. Mitchell's *Holidays*, his first novel in ten years, returns to childhood on the prairies and the traumas of growing up.

Worthy of mention are a number of novels by lesser known writers, including Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (Lester & Orpen Dennys) about a young girl's experiences during the forced relocation of Japanese Canadians in British Columbia, Matt Cohen's *Flowers of Darkness* (McClelland & Stewart) — more small town Eastern Ontario gothic, and Aritha van Herk's *The Tent Peg* (also M&S), the story of a single woman in a mining camp of men in the far North, told alternately by each of the ten characters.

Home Truths (Macmillan), Mavis Gallant's selected Canadian stories, impressed me as the year's most accomplished shorter fiction. Here are stories about Canadians at home and abroad, the famous Linnet Muir stories, and an introduction by the author to place them all in context. At last she is receiving the attention she deserves — in 1981 she was made an Officer of the Order of Canada. In contrast, Jack Hodgins' *The Barclay Family Theatre* (Macmillan), a collection of stories depicting 'just about every kind of invasion you can imagine', linked to the lives of the seven Barclay sisters, was a disappointment after his earlier work. W.P. Kinsella's comic stories in *Born Indian* (Oberon), and Jane Rule's lesbian stories and essays in *Outlander* (Naiad) add to their growing reputations.

Elspeth Cameron's scholarly biography *Hugh MacLennan: A Writer's Life* (University of Toronto Press) was one of the major publishing events of the year, establishing a high standard for future literary biographies. Also notable were a collection of Robertson Davies' reviews and essays on Canadian writing entitled *The Well-Tempered Critic* (McClelland & Stewart), edited by Judith Skelton Grant; a collection of essays by and about Rudy Wiebe called *A Voice in the Land* (NeWest), edited by W.J. Keith; a collection of essays on *Violence in the Canadian Novel* (Memorial University), edited by Terry Goldie and Virginia Harger-Grinling; and Leslie Monkman's *A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature* (University of Toronto). Alto-

gether an exciting, productive and promising year!

DIANA BRYDON

NEW ZEALAND

A strong New Zealand tradition in the writing of short fiction has been reinforced in 1981 by work from both established writers in the genre and from newcomers. Vincent O'Sullivan follows his first collection with *Dandy Edison for Lunch* in which the title story and 'The Witness Man' stand out in a book of high quality. The author assumes a wide variety of personae in these stories, typically viewing some small human incident through the eyes of the crass, the insensitive, the materialistic opportunist: the complacent narrator of Dandy Edison's tragedy is exemplary. C.K. Stead has collected stories written over twenty years as *Free for the Symbol*, in an attractive edition by Longman Paul. Widely different in presentation, these stories, explains Stead, are linked as in the metaphor of the pentagram where 'you must make your pen keep changing direction quite radically without losing a sense of the overall design'. The prose lends solid support to Stead's high achievements in poetry and scholarship — more of that below.

Ian Wedde's *The Shirt Factory* includes the prize winning novella 'Dick Seddon's great dive', along with nine other stories all experimenting with the possibilities of the genre. Other young writers who published first collections of prose last year included Chris Else, *Dreams of Pythagoras* and poet Barry Southam, *Mixed Singles*. Retired teacher, conservationist, novelist (*A Song in the Forest*) and poet, Peter Hooper has an engaging collection, *The Goat Paddock, and Other Stories*; Witi Ihimaera's *The New Not Goes Fishing* gets into paperback (Heinemann), and John Barnett has edited an eclectic collection, including some of these, and others, as *All the Dangerous Animals are in Zoos*.

Two definitive publications are Dan Davin's *Selected Stories*, and, the jewel in the diadem, the *Collected Stories of Maurice Duggan*, edited and introduced by Karl Stead. This latter magnificent volume allows us to appreciate the quality of the 'small successful things' ('Beginnings') that this craftsman achieved in a short enough lifetime. Duggan describes the creative force in his 'Beginnings' essay: 'sometimes the light

invades through green bars and there inexplicably, beginnings lie; if I will be different before the page; if I will wait and in whatever unease allow the flooding of the senses, allow the daemon to enter; and set to work.' His 'small output' stands as a monument in New Zealand fiction.

The novel cannot quite boast such an *annus mirabilis*, but Maurice Gee's follow-up to *Plumb* quite comes up to the standard of the first of a possible trilogy, if indeed it does not surpass it. *Meg* recovers ground first seen through the eyes of Plumb and carries on past his death to the ordering of the new generation. The sensibility of the daughter is quite different from the stern, puritanical outlook of the father, yet the family resemblances attest to Gee's ability as a novelist. Fiona Kidman's second novel (after *A Breed of Women*) is *Mandarin Summer* and demonstrates a marked advance in her skills as a writer; future work from her will clearly be of considerable interest. A further new novel is Philip Temple's *Beak of the Moon*, a tale of life as seen through the eyes of the kea, New Zealand's native mountain parrot; a bird considered merely a nuisance on a camping holiday is more endearing from this point of view. Reprinted by Penguin are two of Ronald Hugh Morrieson's four novels, *Came a Hot Friday*, and *The Scarecrow*; this continues the metamorphosis from unknown to widely popular author that the now dead Morrieson has been undergoing these last few years. Also reprinted is David Ballantyne's fine black comedy of adolescence, *Sydney Bridge Upside Down*. The demand for these reprints seems to suggest a change in the New Zealand reader's taste; no longer does he regard the novel as a cultural object of high earnestness.

Denis Glover died in 1980, having completed a selection of his poetry. Now Penguin has published his *Selected Poems* (following their popular 1980 Sam Hunt collection), with a penetrating introduction by his contemporary Allen Curnow (also to be found in the *Islands* double issue, see below). Along with this is the publication of Glover's two autobiographical pieces, as *Hot Water Sailor* and *Landtubber Ho*. The year has clearly been one of final collections and we can expect critical re-evaluations of many of our accepted literary myths will be made over the next few years. I would think that Glover's *Selected Poems*, as with Duggan's *Collected Stories*, will see him more highly valued than perhaps he has recently been.

New Zealand's highly respected small presses continue to operate against all financial probability; but 1981 was perhaps notable more for the younger poets whose collections attracted interest from the larger publishing houses, especially Oxford. Elizabeth Smither continues a

productive career with two books: *The Legend of Marcello Mastroianni's Wife*, Oxford, in conjunction with Auckland University Press, and Casanova's *Ankle*, attractively produced with illustrations by Jürgen Waibel, from Oxford. These poems are typically sophisticated, coolly sensuous; wit and detachment are her poetic tools, as she dissects ideas of pleasure and pain — a recurring image of the princess and the pea seems to indicate both the nature of her subject matter and the European bent of her imaginative storehouse. Murray Edmond has *End Wall*, a collection I think will assume more and more importance as it infiltrates the consciousness of poetry readers. And Michael Harlow's fourth collection, *Today is the Piano's Birthday*, again Oxford and Auckland, is another book in which a young poet demonstrates his interest in exploring the possibilities inherent in the contemporary poem.

There seems to me to be no clearly definable 'schools' operating at present in New Zealand verse. However, two of the above three poets are all products of Alistair Paterson's stable of *15 Contemporary New Zealand Poets* (1980), his introduction to which has sparked a warm critical debate (including the odd man out, Murray Edmond, again in *Islands*) here, concerning open and closed forms, and formal interests are a common denominator with these poets, as with Rob Jackaman, whose *Shaman and Charlatan* (Cicada Press) collects his poetry since *Hemispheres* (1970), and includes, coincidentally enough, 'Casanova Imprisoned', along with 'Arthur the king' and 'Lee: a Science Fiction Poem', both previously published as limited editions. Jackaman has two volumes of verse forthcoming in 1982.

Michael Morrissey also has further poems, *Dreams*, from Sword Press; the logic of dreaming seems to have liberated the imaginations of a number of writers during the year; see Chris Else, above, and the concept is intrinsic to Harlow's work. A poet, however, who is very much concerned with the real is the Dunedinite and Commonwealth poetry prizewinner, Brian Turner, who has his second book *Ancestors* from John McIndoe. These carefully wrought pieces delineate a region of New Zealand that has established a strong tradition in the poem of landscape and personal insight. Finally in this group, a highly promising collection from Meg Campbell, wife of Alistair, whose *The Way Back* has been beautifully printed on the Campbells' own Pukerua Bay press.

The highlight of the dramatic year has been the performance and publication of new playwright, Greg McGee's *Foreskin's Lament*, a rugby play that came out of a workshop run by Mervyn Thompson and into the year of the Springbok Tour. This has filled theatres wherever it has been

produced and represents a considerable step towards the establishment of an indigenous dramatic tradition. Meanwhile long-serving fighter for the cause, Bruce Mason, has had published not only his new play, *Blood of the Lamb*, commissioned by Christchurch's Court Theatre for three woman actors, and toured through Australia, but also has collected together four of his monodramas as *Solo* — again typical of the trend of 1981.

In the field of literary criticism and related literary topics there have been three important publications. G.K. Stead has collected twenty-five essays, the earliest, on poet Charles Brasch, dating from 1957, the latest, on Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1981), with an introduction, and called them *In The Glass Case*. 'They are a literary history, and ultimately the autobiography of a sensibility', as Ken Arvidson has said in a review, and they display both the academic quality and the entertaining provocativeness for which Stead is so widely regarded. There is also a volume of essays and lectures by Charles Brasch selected and edited by J.L. Watson as *The Universal Dance*. The other important volume is *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, selected and edited by Lauris Edmond, beautifully presented with photographs, by Oxford. It gives a fascinating insight into both the personal and social history of a man who may have epitomised the style of a generation. Oxford continues too its series on New Zealand writers and their work, with Alan Roddick's *Allen Curnow* and Margaret Dalziel's *Janet Frame*. They follow the format established by their fellows.

Although not in the literary field, perhaps the most important book published here last year was *The Oxford History of New Zealand* where our history is viewed chronologically in essays by sixteen different historians, under the editorship of W.H. Oliver; he contributes the final, thorough, chapter on our recent cultural history, 'The awakening imagination'.

The journals have been reduced to three. After long enough a gestation, *Islands* came out as a double issue and proved well worth the wait: a most important issue, as has been hinted above. *Landfall* is the long serving stalwart, but the quarterly sadly completed its year with the death of Peter Smart, its editor since 1977. There is an air of uncertainty about its future. *Climate* 32 was its last issue; in future it will be incorporated with *Pilgrims*, under the editorship of Alistair Paterson. A brave effort by Graham Lindsay was unable to ensure the survival of an attractively edited *Morepork* — but rumour has it that the phoenix will arise as *Parallax*, to be edited by Alan Loney.

A year that was, not only for some magazines and an editor. M.K. Joseph, professor of English at Auckland, novelist (*A Soldier's Tale*, and others), poet (*Inscription on a paper dart*) has died and, early in the new year, Dame Ngaio Marsh, detective novelist, and Frank Sargeson.

SIMON GARRETT

PAKISTAN

As ideological shifts and geo-political realignments in the South Asian region begin to make headlines, the cultural and literary life also takes an expected turn. The literature itself may show little deference to such changes, but the life surely appears for a time unhinged. While politicians, both the ruling and aspiring cadres of them, argued to no visible end the very *raison d'être* of Pakistan, the poets and critics of the country indulged in a futile debate — 'Is Poetry a Positive or Negative Factor in Pakistan's Development?' Questions supposedly long settled are raised again and again; almost all cultural concepts appear to be in need of periodic re-validation. One wonders if that symposium held in Karachi will be followed up in 1982 by another exciting event, such as one possibly given to discussing whether we should burn all existent books and libraries and build anew the *Islamic* purities?

Fortunately, the writers still have their writing in their own hands; they understand the historical imperatives and recognise the place of human will and imagination within the constrictive orders of mechanical control. Channels of publication are few, often clogged by either obscurantism or lack of scruple or pure illiteracy, but patience endures in the end. Several of the writers' current problems were discussed at the Academy of Letters' third annual meeting in Islamabad. It remains to be seen if a qualitative change in the affairs of the writing community will actually come about, and if the various resolutions passed will be implemented; if, indeed, the writers and writing will benefit in the end. At this meeting, the writers were also harangued to 'work for' Islam and the Ideology of Pakistan, and that certainly provided occasion for everyone to draw for himself/herself the distinctive line between propaganda and the writing genuinely *creative*. And the writers did make use of the opportunity; as did the national newspapers, e.g. the editorial titled 'Problems of Writers' in *Dawn* of 30 December.

If we were not quite flooded with the literary output, it is hardly sur-

prising in the year of the banning of the tie and other Western accoutrement in Government offices. What wasn't published, or appeared in a mangled form, can be ascertained partly by reading the regular surveys in the London periodical *Index on Censorship* and the reports by Amnesty International* — a further proof of the painful realization that the lack of personal liberty retards literary expression, and that the freedom of expression and the growth of literature are indissolubly bound together. In a situation where the writers are being asked to become, virtually, the spokesmen and apologists of the government of the day, the concepts of Aesthetic Distance and Artistic Freedom need to be reaffirmed. Surely the writers among the participants of the said meeting did nothing else. They recognised that Aesthetic Distance would actually translate as Narrative Conscience in the extreme situations in certain societies. Luckily, too, even in the most forbidding climate, everything is not determined by political weather; and hardly at all has it been able to kill off its poetry. Adrian Hussain's (Akbar Raipuri) poetry group in Karachi met a few times in the year; unlike Lahore's, the American Center there has not given up support of the literary arts. The present writer, Alamgir Hashmi, published his third book of poetry, *My Second in Kentucky* (Lahore, Vision/Vanguard Books). It contains his poems of the 1970-1977 period and, according to reports received from different ends, the book has been received enthusiastically. Hashmi also published his more recent poems in *The Pakistan Times*, *Viewpoint*, *Asaweek* (Hong Kong), *Chandrabhaga* (India), *Terra Poetica* (USA), *Lotus* (Beirut), *Akros* (UK), *Word Loom* (Canada), and the *Washington Review* (USA). Several other Pakistani poets published in magazines abroad: Zulfikar Ghose in *Kunapipi*, Kaleem Omar in *Encounter* (UK), and Athar Tahir in *Pennsylvania Review* (USA). Some of Ghose's and Hashmi's work has also been anthologized: in *How Strong the Roots: Poems of Exile* (London, Evans Brothers) and *70 on the 70s: A Decade's History in Verse* (Ashland, Ohio, The Ashland Poetry Press), respectively.

Over the last decade, Zulfikar Ghose has emerged as a novelist of importance. While his poetry-fans thought he was busy putting together a new collection of poems, he actually brought forth a new novel with a most curious title, *Hulme's Investigations into the Bogart Script* (Austin and New York, Curbstone Press). This, his seventh novel, is in a sense his first 'American' fiction, after Pakistan-India, England-Europe, and Brazil-Latin America. For most readers raised on the rather staid mores of British fiction, it proves to be a teaser and tickler, a French fashion

washed up on Ghose's verbal shore. Ghose has always proved to be good at 'stealing' — in T.S. Eliot's sense of the word. His appropriation of elements of contemporary American culture to startling fictional uses gives evidence of his superb artistic means. If one agrees to the terms of the narrative, there is much fun to be had. Which brings me to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a novel that has been claimed for India. I do not wish to contest that claim, but since Rushdie's parents live in Pakistan (the filial connections having been so proved), the book sold in Pakistan, as they say, like hot cakes; though tasting in the end like a cold cake in many an expectant mouth. 'Joyce-like', says one, 'masturbatory', says another sharp critic; but the pirated Pakistani edition of *Midnight's Children* selling at ten rupees below the price of the imported edition is proof that 'people like it'. Which is something unlikely to happen to V.S. Naipaul's *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*, despite its well-focused and fairly long reportage of Pakistan. Even so, the latter book is also being read widely.

Critical debate during the year was largely of a theoretical and ideological nature. *Viewpoint* has been central to it, as most of it took place in its pages; the participants being poets and critics like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Izzat Majeed, and Nadir Ali. The topics discussed pertained to the relative merits of the Urdu and Punjabi literary traditions, and the degree of mutual exclusivity practised by them. In a separate short essay titled 'Decolonizing Literature', Faiz, who is the Editor of *Lotus* and supervises the work of the Beirut-based Afro-Asian Writers' Association, encouraged broadening the scope of school syllabuses by adopting the indigenous literature of the Third World, whether it be in English, Urdu, Swahili, Sindhi, or French. If some Third World societies have sought to eliminate foreign-language literature from their cultural life, even as the writings were by indigenous writers, Faiz advocated a policy of saner 'gradualism'. He would not support disenfranchizing the individual writers concerned. By stating this, Faiz certainly put his finger on a burning issue, one that would require further debate.

Awards for original works in Urdu have been announced by various organizations, such as the Open University in Islamabad, the Pakistan Academy of Letters, and the Writers' Guild. The encouragement being given to writing in the regional languages is not quite the same as that for Urdu; thus, writers' organizations in Punjab and Sind, in particular, have sent their resolutions to the Government to patronise greater academic and literary activity in the respective languages of the regions.

While the quality of book-production in the country has been steadily declining — and apparently no one has been much concerned —

UNESCO has taken note. It organised a large book-exhibition in Lahore and sponsored a well-attended seminar in book-designing.

Explorations was not seen at all during the year. We miss it. *Iqbal Review*, a Lahore journal devoted to the work and interests of the poet-philosopher Iqbal, is one of the quality scholarly publications appearing with remarkable regularity. And perhaps the best news in the year for Urdu Literature studies was the founding of the *Annual of Urdu Studies* by C.M. Naim at the University of Chicago. The performance of weekly book-section in Pakistani newspapers has been fair through the year; the reviews would be better, of course, if stricter criteria were encouraged.

In Bibliography, there is a significant change. The Library of Congress *Accessions List Pakistan* Vol. 19, No 10/12 (Oct-Dec 1980) was the last issue in that series. During last year, it was superseded by *Accessions List: South Asia*, beginning with Vol. 1, No 1 in January 1981.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz has been active in Translation, apart from the couple of collections of verse and prose that coincided with the occurrence of his seventieth birthday. He collaborated with Naomi Lazard on the translation of his poems, some of which appeared in *Gilt Edge* (USA). Alamgir Hashmi published his translations from contemporary Urdu and Punjabi poetry in *Pacific Quarterly* (New Zealand) and *Translation* (USA). Ahmed Ali has also been busy on translating and contributing essays of a general socio-literary interest to *The Muslim* (Islamabad). He also presented a paper, 'The Novel at the End of the 20th Century' to the 18th International Meeting of Writers in Belgrade. Alamgir Hashmi participated in the EACLALS triennial conference at the University of Frankfurt and gave a reading of his recent poems.

One can never be very far from the main themes of one's own life, personal and collective. Death is the ultimate censorship, which understandably supersedes both Pre-Censorship and (the recently renamed) Self Censorship: Hamid Jalal, Justice Muhammad Munir, and Hadi Hussain, authors and critics all, and Josh Malihabadi, the towering, revolutionary poet who lived his later years as a banned writer, will no longer write. Hamid Jalal did much as a Manto translator; his effort will be hard to match. Translation, in general, seems to be faring well. Vanguard Books of Lahore are planning to launch a series of English translations of literary works in Punjabi, Urdu, and other languages, which I hope to celebrate next year.

ALAMGIR HASHMI

*Poets like Habib Jalib, Ahmed Faraz, and Usaid Daman are not the only examples.

SOUTH AFRICA

The titles of two novels, *Amandla* (Zulu = power) by Miriam Tlali and *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee, provide suitably descriptive metaphors for a great deal of South African literary endeavour during the past year. On the one hand, the Black Consciousness and Black Power ideals, which characterized Soweto poetry in the seventies, have continued to inspire a spate of prose writing based around the 1976 Soweto experience, notably *Amandla* itself, Wessel Ebersohn's *Store up the Anger*, Sipho Sepamla's *A Ride on the Whirlwind* and Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*. On the other hand, Cavafy's motif, utilized by Coetzee, represents a re-imagination of an earlier colonial stereotype, that of 'Apollonian' Europe and 'Dionysian' Africa; and the stark examination in *Waiting for the Barbarians* of the paradoxes of 'civilization' and 'barbarism' has the civilizing force, in an unnamed Empire, of maintaining standards by the most atrocious means. If Conrad said it all before, Coetzee's novel, like Christopher Hope's collection of poetry *In the Country of the Black Pig*, offers an imaginative reworking of a theme that is crucially pertinent to a South Africa agonizing towards alternative 'solutions'.

The conflicts of racial polarization also inspired Peter Wilhelm's short stories *At the End of the War* and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*. The latter is a fable of cultural transplantation involving an upper middle-class South African couple who, having escaped a Johannesburg in a state of siege for the relative safety of a tribal village, are forced under the eye of their former servant, July, to re-assess the values upon which their affluent liberalism was based. Similarly, the radicalization of white/black attitudes has given impetus to Zakes Mda's award-winning plays, collected as *We Shall Sing for our Fatherland*, and to the 'black comedies or white tragedies' of Pieter-Dirk Uys. This English-Afrikaans playwright's biting satires, *Flail is for Whites Only* and *Adapt or Die*, ran successfully at fringe theatres, while his *Paradise is Closing Down* appeared, together with three other plays, in *Theatre Two*, the second volume in Stephen Gray's ambitious playscript series.

The existence, since the first South African English writing in the 1820s, of a radical line of development, one consistently ignored by successive 'traditional' anthologists, provided the starting-point for Michael Chapman's anthology *A Century of South African Poetry*; this is the most comprehensive collection hitherto of South African poetry written in English, from Thomas Pringle in the 1820s to the Soweto poets of the 1970s. In addition, several slim individual collections appeared during

the year. Ridley Beeton's *The Landscape of Requirement* covers twenty years of this poet's career and reveals a voice seeking difficult 'requirements' amid the flux of contradictory experiences. More narrowly, Sheila Fugard's *Mythic Things* searches Buddhist landscapes for consolations, while Mtshenzeli Matshoba's *Seeds of War* finds its hopes and fears amid the grimy immediacies of township life.

The above-mentioned titles all appeared under the imprints of either Donker or Ravan (both of Johannesburg); and it was heartening to see more established writers, many of whom were published abroad before the existence of viable local publishing opportunities, also turning their support to the South African industry. (That debilitating colonial bogey, of recognition abroad as the yardstick of achievement, is at last dead!). Gordimer appeared simultaneously under South African and overseas imprints, as did Alan Paton in his first novel for thirty years: *Ah, but your land is beautiful* is a vivid account, using the 'Taction' techniques favoured by writers such as Norman Mailer, of South African political tensions during the crisis of liberalism in the 1950s. The shorter writings of Es'kia Mphahlele, for years difficult to come by in out-of-print editions, were republished as *The Unbroken Song*, while the appearance of the *Selected Poems of Roy Campbell* ensured that the work of this first significantly modern South African poet would again be freely available. If any poet deserves the mantle of Campbell's successor, it is Douglas Livingstone, who has belatedly received recognition for five collections of fine poetry written over the past twenty years. Awarded an honorary degree from the University of Natal, he was also the subject of Chapman's *Douglas Livingstone: A Critical Study of his Poetry*. Placed in perspective, too, was the phenomenon of Drum magazine (*The Beat of Drum*), which during the 1950s nurtured a generation of Sophiatown writers. In addition, a selection covering ninety years of black writing and commentary was edited by Mphahlele as *Reconstruction*. And 'reconstruction' was the theme, too, of the anthology edited by Mofokeng, Kadhani and Musamira as *And Now the Poets Speak: Poems Inspired by the Struggle for Zimbabwe* (Gwelo).

From the Heineman AWS came *South African Peoples Plays*. Predictably banned in South Africa, this collection comprises four plays which were aimed at 'popular' audiences and performed in the townships at the time of the 1976 disturbances. Obviously regarding the works of Kente, Mutwa, Sheni and Workshop '71 as 'subversive', the authorities banned two of the plays presented here and cited Shanti in the charge sheet at the SASO/BPC trial of 1975-6.

In spite of the socio-literary significance of the Heineman book, a notable feature of the 'post-Soweto' literary climate has been the efforts by several black writers to learn from at the same time as attempting to move beyond what the poet Chris van Wyk has called the 'Soweto syndrome'. In this respect one of the more promising books of the year was Achmat Dangor's *Waiting for Laila*. Himself a former banned person, Dangor presents a harrowing odyssey through the detritus of District Six, the traditional Malay quarter in the heart of Cape Town, which, under a rigid Group Areas Act, was demolished by the government. Shifting from realistic description to hallucinatory sequences, from lyrical paeans to a vivid gutter talk, Dangor's search for the *Idéal* amid the *Spleen* ranges in memory over a centuries-old violation of Cape Malay culture.

The crucial significance for South African literature of the Johannesburg/Cape Town-based publishing industry, established during the last decade, is apparent when we consider the fact that first books like Dangor's *Waiting for Laila*, demanding of the reader a knowledge of indigenous slang and local reference, and making no special overtures to audiences abroad, would in all probability not prior to the seventies have seen print. The excitement of such a literary 'renaissance' promises to continue into the eighties. What is depressing, however, is that so few international 'South Africanists' (at the African Literature Association Conference in Claremont, for instance) were even vaguely aware of the vitality, variety or significance of the renewed South African literary activity of the last ten years.

MICHAEL CHAPMAN

SINGAPORE

If 1980 was a good year for poetry, 1981 was a good year for fiction, particularly the short story. Altogether five new books of short stories appeared in the course of this year. One of these, *ASEAN Short Stories* (ed. Robert Yeo) is actually an anthology of short stories from the ASEAN region (Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia & Singapore). On the whole Yeo has done a very good job to bring together, in a single volume, stories as diverse as those of Usman Awang (Malaysia) and Sionil Jose (Philippines). There are 20 different stories by 20 different authors. The distribution by country is not, however, reflective of the true state of affairs. Each of the five countries is represented by four authors. No doubt, Yeo has included translations from languages other

than English, but such an even spread might suggest to the unwary reader that the short story is as healthy in the Philippines as it is in Singapore! In the latter it is only recently that we have seen a flowering of the short story whereas Filipino writers have been using the form for many years. Yeo, in editing the volume, was inevitably, faced with numerous difficulties — availability not being the least. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that most of the stories selected are, unfortunately, old stories, stories that have been around for quite some time. The younger and newer writers have, possibly, not been given the attention that some readers of Yeo's volume would consider merited. Nevertheless, as this is the first venture in this direction (no other ASEAN anthology is as yet available, though I suspect following Yeo's lead there will be ASEAN anthologies of poetry and drama coming along soon) it is a commendable effort. As Yeo himself writes in the Introduction, these stories are mainly meant to be read for pleasure. And there is genuine pleasure to be derived from the reading. Highly recommended.

The other four volumes of short stories are all individual collections. *The Parting Gift & Other Stories* by Lim Thean Soo has a charm not found in the rest of the volumes. Lim writes elaborately with ample descriptions of setting and character so that the reader finds himself well in the situations written about. Two of the stories, 'Roast Duck' and 'Foster Mother' are unusually moving, dealing as they do with poignant events which cannot but affect the sensitive reader. If a little unpolished, these stories are, nevertheless, testimonies to Lim's astute understanding of human character. Most of the other stories are exciting reads but quite ordinary and one of them — 'The Day Of A Thousand Hours' — an experiment in science fiction, does not really succeed. Lim should stick to his forte which is historical characterisation.

Unlike Lim, the stories of Gopal Baratham are all very readable and very polished. Baratham (a neurosurgeon by profession) has a firm grasp over his language and is able to use English with the kind of confidence which many Singapore writers lack. Indeed, at times one cannot help feeling that Baratham's superb mastery of the language, is also his chief shortcoming. The stories are very well crafted and polished to the degree that the reader has little to contribute to the stories' success. Most of the stories are satirical in vein and one suspects the author feels like a modern-day Singaporean misanthrope! *Figments of Experience*, as Baratham's volume is called, is precisely that: the figments of experience presented remain nothing more than figments, delighting the reader but also leaving him wanting something firmer, something more solidly founded. This is Baratham's first collection and one hopes that his next

will go beyond cleverness and ridicule.

Glimpses of the Past is the first volume, in English, of short stories by the well-known Singapore writer, Wong Meng Voon. Wong is known mostly for his work in Chinese and this first attempt in English (actually, as he states in his Preface, the stories presented here are taken from two earlier volumes in Chinese and translated — with some modifications — by the author himself) is not bad at all. Though the settings of some of the stories now appear quaint, in that history has left them far behind, the social commentaries contained in the stories still have application. Thus the plight of Elder Sister Kuei-ying, in the story of that name, is as telling today as it was in the past: elder sisters in the Asian context often have to sacrifice their lives for the benefit of their younger brothers and frequently the love and the trust endowed by these elder sisters is bitterly betrayed by the younger brothers when they become successful men of the world. It is a powerful story, with a moral. In fact, most of the stories in Wong's collection have a moral to impart, confirming, once again, the well-founded belief that Asian literature, at its best, tends to be moralistic. One or two of Wong's stories — 'The Mahjong Prodigy' for example — strike the reader as being somewhat contrived and lacking aesthetic appeal. Taken together, however, the collection marks the beginning, I think, of a new era in Singapore literature in English: the availability in English, of work done in the other main languages of Singapore. It is encouraging to find that this work was supported and subsidised by the National Book Development Council of Singapore.

Rebecca Chua's *The Newspaper Editor and Other Stories* is another first for its author. Though several of the stories have been published in periodicals before, reading them again in a collected form leaves a slightly different (and a more impressive) appeal. Chua deals mainly with women characters — their problems, their careers, their traumas, their joys and aspirations. As a career woman herself she is well situated to do this, though it may be advisable for her not to hammer her points too hard. In these stories, mainly dealing with psychological problems of stress and strain, there is a kind of insistence which can be off-putting if done too often. Chua has a grasp of technique and is able to write convincingly about frailties of human nature. She ought to develop these talents and not spend too much energy on writing merely impressionistic stuff. There is a very long story in the present collection entitled (appropriately!) 'Soliloquy'. In parts it is intense and makes good reading but on the whole it smacks of over-writing and an indulgence in emotional outbursts. If worked out to novel-length the story might succeed but in a collection of short stories it proves tedious.

Son of a Mother was first published in 1973 and won the National Book Development Council of Singapore Award in 1976. It is a novel of great strength chiefly because it is ruthlessly honest. Michael Soh, the author, is totally unpretentious and writes almost with first-hand experience about the extended family. The novel centres around Ah Leng who is caught in the web of family relationships. The story is passionately told and gives ample insight into the Chinese way of life. It was good to see it reprinted in 1981. It is one of the very few works of fiction produced in Singapore that has the capacity to sustain the reader's attention. It is a pity that Soh did not revise the novel to take away some of the awkward phraseology that spoils the writing in parts.

The Ministry of Culture's *Prize Winning Plays*, Volumes 2, 3 and 4 appeared during the year. Edited by Robert Yeo, the volumes represent the prize winning efforts of the Ministry Play-Writing Competition. The plays in these three volumes are quite competently written though none of them has the power of the plays in the first volume (published in 1980). Their publication does, however, underline governmental support for local creative efforts and one hopes that the Ministry will, likewise, fund the publications of poems, short stories and novels. In drama the most exciting event for Singapore was the production of *Nurse Angamuthu's Romance* — a play adapted from Peter Nichols's *National Health* by Max le Blond and produced by him for the Singapore Drama Festival. *Nurse Angamuthu's* production signalled a new era for the Singapore stage in terms of a liberal representation of life in Singapore. It is good and heartening to know that gradually the constraints are being relaxed. The new atmosphere will make for a healthy all-round growth in literary expression.

Only one volume of poetry came out in 1981: *As Long As Rivers Flow*, a joint effort by two young men, Chew Yen Fook and Samy Dorai. The book is full of lovely photographs revealing the idealism and youthful energy behind the poems. Most of the poems are attempts at versification and few really impress one as being poems of any real worth. Two or three, however, suggest that there is some potential in the effort. Both Chew and Samy would be well advised to learn more about the craft of poetry so that their future work will be more than rhyme and rhythm.

The weekly Poetry Corner in *The Sunday Times* continued throughout the year with the occasional good poem showing up. Some genuine new poets were discovered in the process and at least three of them are now planning individual volumes. Charlotte Lim's literary programmes over Radio continued to introduce listeners to writers and their work and in so doing helped to make the wider public more aware of Singapore writers.

The second issue of SINGA, the official journal of literature and the arts, appeared in June. It was a little weaker than the inaugural issue but some contributions within it gave it the strength and quality to claim respect and hearing. Following the release of the second issue, an Evening of Poetry was held during which contributors to the first two issues of SINGA read their efforts in public. The event was a mixed success. Two Evenings of Poetry and Music organised by the Literary Society of the National University of Singapore went down well with the audiences in December. Poetry evenings are becoming increasingly popular and it may soon transpire that regular poetry readings (either monthly or fortnightly) will begin to take place. A book-launching and book-honouring ceremony was hosted by the Society of Singapore Writers, as were two other functions devoted to a discussion of literature in Singapore. The Society of Singapore Writers has tremendous potential to organise the literary scene in Singapore and one hopes that it will set itself in order to achieve this goal.

The most negative and damaging occurrence in terms of Singapore's literary development took place in the critical arena. Apart from the usual reviews appearing in the popular media and the annual issue of the *Singapore Book World*, *Commentary* (a journal published by the University of Singapore Society) carried a series of articles totally devoted to the vicious destruction of local literary personalities. Written by one of the editors, the appearance of these articles not only represented an abuse of editorial powers but also went to suggest that any kind of effort devoted to the encouragement of creative writing in Singapore was sooner or later going to be attacked by the self-appointed pundits and custodians of local literary standards. It is an absolute disgrace that such a journal as *Commentary* should have allowed such articles to appear. One only hopes that the Committee responsible for appointing *Commentary's* editorial board would not allow this shameful state of affairs to continue.

Singapore's Annual Book Fair grew even larger in 1981 and it is apparent now that Singaporeans on the whole are getting to enjoy reading. The fact that there is official support for the arts — and for literature — shows that the coming years can expect a flourishing of creative activities in this direction. On the whole, therefore, 1981 was a good year for literary activity, its goodness having been marred only by the regretful publication of degenerate criticism in *Commentary*.

KIRPAL SINGH

Book Reviews

AUSTRALIAN POETRY SINCE THE 50s

Review article based on *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Verse*, ed. H.P. Heseltine, 214 pp, 1981. A\$5.00.

H.P. Heseltine's anthology of *Modern Australian Verse* offers the reader a chance to evaluate the last 25 years of Australian poetry.

Its title is a little misleading. This is not an anthology of the best contemporary work; for as Professor Heseltine explicitly states, he has excluded 'all those poets who had established their reputations by the middle 1950s, no matter how well and how often they have published since that time'. Poets being a late-maturing breed, this means some notable omissions. A.D. Hope, Judith Wright and Peter Porter, to name only the most notable. He has also restricted major recent poets like Murray and Dawe to representative samples, the better to show the range and variety of lesser or younger writers.

The result is an anthology of the Vietnam and post Vietnam, rather than post World War II strains in Australian poetry. In particular it aims to chart a general movement away from formal verse and academic standards, a movement that is clearly visible when Silvia Kantarun (b.1936) writes

Some poems fall anyhow,
all of a heap anywhere, dishevelled,
legs apart in loneliness and
desperation,
and there's talk of standards.

The abandonment of formal verse seems to have been permanent. But the rejection of standards leads, by the early 70s to the cult of impressive statements for their own sake as in Robert Adamson's

Does it grow from self-importance
One thing I shall continue for you
are my strange writings,
putting each word down, into place, I hope for —
coming back to where I began then,
I hope for coherence of what I do understand.
Though slogans and banner pour forth,
It all returns to the idea of a Capitol with a grip
on those of us who cannot,
or choose not, to resist
A demoniacal intelligence
feeding on poetry.

and is effectively over when Vicki Vildikas (b.1948) remarks

I know you will say
the perfection of the language
is the point of being a poet —
the skill of a mortician?

A phenomenon that complicates, but in another sense necessitates this anthology is the '70s Bubble' in Australian poetry. This was a confused and frightened period which is difficult to explain briefly to those who were not in Australia at the time. ... One of the sad things about poetry is of course that people spend years trying to trap in words their innermost feelings; yet when they finally pluck up courage to place their words under a second person's gaze, those words shrivel on the page into a string of clichés and ill-assorted images. (The lucky few to whom this doesn't happen are the true poets, one presumes.) Telling people that their poems don't work for others is a thankless job, as all editors know; but it is essential. There is nothing sadder than the position of a poet who has been falsely encouraged.

Somewhere between 1967 and 1977 false encouragement happened on a massive scale in Australia. The Vietnam War, opposed by the whole literary community, had destroyed all confidence in authority or established 'standards'. Poetry was a matter of protest, not quality. Co-incidentally, the appearance of small backyard presses, whose only real cost was labour, enabled every man to be his own or his neighbour's publisher. So for about 10 years no one had the confidence to tell anyone that he or she couldn't write. 'We are all poets now', as Michael Dransfield put it. Hundreds published — and not only in magazines. Well over 100 books (often unedited) were produced in a nation which had previously averaged 5 or 4 books of poetry a year.

The rapid emergence of the new Australian drama of Williamson *et al.* added to the excitement. Though the drama was popular and nationalistic, and the poetry the reverse, the poets did not scruple to claim that their prolific productions were an equally historic breakthrough. The Australian intellectual ever since colonial times has had a sense of isolation and a fear of being behind world trends. The Bubble Poets used this to sweep away the last remnants of established 'standards'. Their ever-changing schools were always presented as the latest in European or American fashion. Thus their main magazine was called *New Poetry*, and John Tranter's anthology of Bubble poets was arrogantly titled *The New Australian Poetry*. Poets who would not have reached print a decade earlier now not merely published their own or each other's works, they then set up as critics or reviewers and exchanged extravagant commendations.

The result of this easy coinage of reputations was, as an economist might have predicted, a massive inflation of literary currency. Anything less than stupendous praise came to seem like contempt. By 1976, one minor poet, reviewing in *The Australian* newspaper, could describe another's latest book as 'the greatest literary masterpiece since Dante, with of course the possible exception of Bob Dylan's *Desire*'.

The term '70s Bubble', with its stockmarket associations, tells the story. The boom in the reputation-market involved both genuine euphoria among many and cynical manipulation by a few who became the 'underground' promoters and power-brokers. The upward spiral couldn't last. By 1978 the poetry market, which had soared on the hopes born with the drama, slumped. The pro-Bubble editors, hastily installed two years earlier by such conservative bastions as *Menzies* magazine and Angus & Robertson, were

as hastily replaced, and dozens of 'great poets' were left to discover that they were at best very minor ones.

By 1979 it was clear that the vast promissory notes of the Bubble period could expect to pay only a few pence in the pound. Yet there was no dramatic Ern Malley hoax, such as had ended a previous bubble. The let-down was fairly gradual, partly because the easy publication-conditions of the mid-seventies had brought on a number of talented poets, but mainly because so many members of the establishment had made embarrassing compromises with the Bubble during the 70s.

The shrewder of the undergoing promoters had already dug in for the lean times ahead. One of their new tricks was a kind of vanity-publishing in which the publisher took his reward not in cash but in grateful disciples who would maintain his reputation.

Sometimes these manoeuvres extended well outside Australia. Once at a literary conference in Europe I was introduced to 'the famous Australian poet X', of whom I had never heard. X turned out to have published only half a dozen poems in magazines. He had been accepted as a major poet on the basis of an impressive-looking book of his verse titled (let us say) *Later Poems: the 70s Decade*. It was in fact his only book, and had been published with his own labour on a highly suspect press and without any editorial procedures. Asked at the Conference to give a talk on recent Australian poetry, he read a mixture of one-third of his poems, one-third his publisher's, and one-third by others who had published on that press. Some of these later helped his publisher to a series of grants on the grounds that he was an important underground leader....

Clearing out this Augean stables of moribund and decaying reputations is a formidable task even for an experienced anthologist like Professor Headline, previously the editor of *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*. But it is made timely by the rush of some better-known Bubble poets recently to produce 'definitive' anthologies of the period.

Reviewing several such anthologies in a recent article in *Island* magazine, Les Murray remarks that they 'devalue Australian literature in the eyes of students and readers alike by the indulgence, frequently together, of mediocrity, hype, and local literary clout'. An anthology of recent poetry by a non-partisan critic of known integrity is long overdue; and it is for this reason Professor Headline states that his aim is to offer 'a sufficient sampling of modern Australian poetry to allow the interested reader to gauge its kind and quality for himself, unprejudiced by an *ex parte* introduction or an obviously partisan selection'.

Even so, Murray finds fault with the standards of selection, accusing the anthology of 'indulgence of rubbish'; but this is perhaps to confuse a *representative* anthology with a long-overdue anthology of the best. (The forthcoming Gray-Lehmann anthology of recent verse, with its motto *sola quidam*, may give us that.)

In general I think that Professor Headline's anthology threads its way with great skill through the minefield of the 70s Bubble. Like a good editor, he states his contributors' aims in positive terms. But he passes over in merited silence such dishonesties as their claim to be connected with the Australian *La Mouvance* movement in drama, and he also states quite explicitly that 'the phenomenon has run its course'. The only one of their promotional terms which he consents to use is 'the generation of '68' tag (there were some links with West European radicalism), and even then in inverted commas and with the remark that the notion 'seems as true to me as most such notions'.

Certainly there are risks in even the most cautious academic summation of a movement whose claims, like Hollywood alimony-suits, were often cunningly based on the hope of being beaten down from the absurd to the merely outrageous. And it's true that a lot of

second-rate poems get into the anthology, though none that have not some literary merit and representative interest. It is after all the function of the academic not just to evaluate but also to collect material, and one could hardly wish the net to be cast, at this point, any less widely than Heselgrave has done. The ordinary poetry-reader, like myself, who could scarcely hope to plough through the endless poetry publications of the 70s, will be grateful that the job has been done.

Assuming that Professor Heselgrave's anthology is fairly representative, I think five major conclusions can be drawn about the development of Australian verse since the mid-fifties.

1. As expected, the major talents are pre-eminent. There are some gems from less-known names: but Murray, Dawe, Beaver, Buckley, Lehmann, Page and Dransfield tend to stand out like rainbows in a rather floury pudding. There is much mediocrity (as several reviewers have complained); and many examples of that irritating sort of poem whose odd usages and erratic images just *might* be evidence of an unusual and interesting sensibility, even though one is 50% to 90% sure that they are due simply to incompetence and to straining after effect. By international standards many pieces have what the car industry would call a low power-to-weight ratio. Thus despite its convenient format and price, the Penguin anthology is not easy reading. You need to be something of a sportsman to get through it.

2. For those who count the sexes: — it's mainly a male affair. There is no female writer of Judith Wright's pre-eminence in recent generations; though Gwen Harwood, Grace Perry, Judith Rodriguez and Sylvia Kantaris have their moments, and Rhyll McMaster's 'The brinechrimp' is a 19-line jewel.

3. There are some surprises in quality, especially among the Bubble poets. Relative to reputation and number of publications, Barry Breen, Richard Tipping, Tim Thorne and Rae Desmond Jones come up better, and Bob Adamson, John Tranter and Rodney Hall worse than expected. (Though I fancy I could have picked a livelier selection from Tranter.) Martin (son of George) Johnston's 'Gradus ad Parnassum' effectively dramatizes at length the quandary of an intelligent poet defeated by prolixity and lack of standards:

...I'm not sure that it's much of a poem
but it'll have to do, I'm thirsty to start with
and the pubs have opened, and besides I think deep down
I'm hoping
that someone will try to pinch my poems, and much good
may it do them: each one the precise, the only possible
delineation of a complex of thinking and feeling;
the explanation of each poem
precisely the poem itself.
Sometimes it's hard to repress a smigger...

Tom Shapcott, sometimes criticised as the easily-pleased reviewer (of a slightly older generation) whose permissiveness encouraged the inflation of reputations, emerges as a surprisingly substantial and varied poet.

4. Vicki Viidikas and Michael Dransfield come surprisingly late in this order-of-age anthology, reminding us just how precocious they were. (Both were born in 1948: Dransfield died of tetanus/heroin in 1975.) Viidikas shows honesty and a touch of class in everything she writes; though her main talent may be for prose. Dransfield is far the most talented of the Bubble poets. He expresses (and parodies) their lax standards in lines like:

I'd woken early
worried about some
obscure matter

decided to start a new school of poetry

something to do with temperature...

yet he rarely fails to find poetry in even the lightest forms:

...I went to see the holy lands
i had to pay to get inside
a war was going when i left
with prizes for the church that won

i went to see a girl i knew
i had to pay to get inside
but when i left she gave me love
as if it were of value.

5. The poems show a steady movement from formalism to freedom. Bruce Beaver shows the advantages of syntactical freedom:

Pain, the problem of, not answered
by dogma, orthodox or other-
wise...

Dawe moves to the vernacular, Hall towards the quirky, and Shapcott introduces the looseness of discursive prose. Then on page 96 Sylvia Karanidis demands release from standards, and the Bubble proper is on. It continues (with the notable interjections of Page, Lehmann and Murray) until page 143 when Robert Gray (b 1945) marks the first of a series of talented younger poets who resisted or ignored it. These include Peter Scrymgeour, Rhyll McMaster, Alan Wearne and Kevin Hart (born 1954). Alan Gould whose second book *Astral Sea* won last year's Premier's Prize is perhaps the most unfortunate omission from this group, though most of them, as Heseltine says, are too young to be assessed yet. It is clear that these poets have inherited a tradition of total freedom of thought and expression, but are returning to more tradesmanlike standards of construction and communication. (The poems suddenly get much easier to read.) Where they, and other young Australian poets will go from here remains to be seen.

MARK O'CONNOR

'THE COMMON DISH' AND THE UNCOMMON POET:

Les A. Murray's *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*.

One of the major problems for the modern poet is how to break free from the tyranny of the lyric, how to enlarge his scope to include the amplitude of narrative, and so regain for poetry something that was effectively lost to prose fiction in the nineteenth century. The problem is, in the end, one of style. English poets from Chaucer to Browning had at their disposal a middle style for narrative poems, a flexible medium distinct from prose in its surface tensions and underlying rhythms, and capable of embracing the racy colloquialisms of low-style comedy as well as, when occasion demanded, the more elaborate rhetoric of a formal high style. But Browning was the last poet to write in this medium successfully: since then poetry has come to mean, overwhelmingly, lyric poetry. It is almost as if the poet, faced with the usurpation of his traditional rôle of teller of tales by the novelist, has lost nerve and given up the struggle.

Not quite, of course. Robert Frost made an attempt to haul Victorian verse-narrative into the twentieth century, though many of his poems only serve to draw attention to the problem; for it is often hard to see what is gained by his use of blank verse, which frequently gives the stories a quaint and outdated air. In the end, Frost's achievement lies in his lyrics and shorter poems such as 'After Apple-Picking', 'Birches' and 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'.

Poets who wish to write more expansively on religious or philosophical themes are confronted, of course, by a similar predicament: what was once a traditional area for poetic composition has been usurped by expository prose. Even more urgently, modern poets have felt the need to challenge the ascendancy of the prose writer, but the problem on which so many poems have foundered is once again that of style. The later poems of Wallace Stevens illustrate this very well where poetry and sense are often sacrificed in favour of abstract philosophical speculation. *The Necessary Angel* (Stevens' collection of essays on reality and the imagination) is far more readable and says much the same thing as the obscure, abstracted verse of 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'.

Faced with this apparent impasse, the most successful poems have been those which operate within the lyric genre, but which give the illusion of a longer, narrative work, that is to say, the linked sequence of shorter poems. Eliot achieved this in *The Waste Land* where a comparatively short sequence of just over 400 lines nevertheless gives the reader the feeling of having read a much longer work of epic proportions. The illusion is produced by the range of styles and verse forms Eliot uses, and by the web of allusion, literary, historical and mythological, as well as religious, which he orchestrates in his 'heap of broken images'. So the reader moves not only in a linear direction but, as it were, three-dimensionally through historical and mythological time, as the poem sweeps from contemporary London to Carthage, from Dante's Hell to the Chapel Perilous.

The strategies used by Eliot have been amongst the most effective in extending the lyric form in our century – though the way is littered with failed attempts, as *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound bear witness.

At first glance, Les A. Murray's new book *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*¹ may seem a long way, stylistically and structurally, from Eliot's poem, yet similar strategies underlie this sequence; just as Murray's vision, like Eliot's, is religious and universal, as well as contemporary and personal. *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* is subtitled 'a novel sequence', and in fact the book does tell a story, meeting several of the demands of the novel form: the main characters are fully realised psychologically, for example, and they

act within a recognisable and finely drawn social context. It is also 'novel' in another, important way, for *The Boys*... is a sequence of 140 sonnets — a sonnet being understood in its looser modern sense of a 14-line poem comprising a range of metres and rhythms from ballad metre and free verse to rhymed iambic pentameters, the lines being grouped in any number of combinations to meet the demands of the moment.

Other poets have experimented with this form in recent years, most notably Robert Lowell in *Notebook* and *History*. Lowell, however, tends to accept the traditional notion of the sonnet as a closed form. His poems often gain by juxtaposition with other sonnets on similar themes, but there is no sense of a linear, narrative progression. Like the Elizabethan sonneteers, his sequences centre on a theme or group of themes: they do not tell stories. This, so far as I know, is Murray's own contribution to the sonnet sequence — at least as far as English goes.

The story of *The Boys*... centres on Kevin Forbust and Cameron Reebby (the boys of the title), each in his way dissatisfied with modern society, each, in the language of the sixties, a drop out. The plot hinges on the death of Kevin's great uncle, Clarrie Dunn, whose wish to be buried among his kin in the farming community where he was brought up, is deftly ignored by his surviving relatives in the city. Kevin Forbust, motivated by what is at first no more than an obscure feeling of propriety, steals the corpse with his friend Reebby, and drives it the hundreds of miles to Dark's Plain, where the old man wishes to be buried. Their action is not understood in the city, where the boys' sense of decency and right is seen as bloody-mindedness, a sentimental gesture, or sheer anarism.

As they drive through the suburbs and then deeper into the country, the old man's corpse propped on the back seat, the journey takes on the character of a journey through the hell of joyless life in the modern city. In an all-night cab, snippets of conversation are overheard — two characters discussing the failure of the Welfare State — the paradox that State concern for the welfare of its citizens has lead to a selfish isolationism:

*'There's a mess spent in the cities
We didn't do affluence very well' (10)¹*

That spirit is manifested in many ways, in the extremes of the feminist movement with its explodable, unpredictable rage and anger:

*it's a mask when you can't get a mask off it makes you murderous
we've tried to believe the opposite of everything too quickly (11)*

mean Reebby. It's there too in the encounter with the Hell's Angels at another truck stop 'collecting taxation of fear' (13) and humiliation.

But as they drive deeper into the countryside and nearer their destination, the boys stumble into a world with different values, where people are not (by and large) at war with themselves and their surroundings. This is suggested first in the encounter with Athol Dunn, one of Clarrie's kinsmen, and the first person the boys meet to understand the motives behind their action. The kitchen of Athol Dunn's farmhouse represents the countryman's (as opposed to the city dweller's) pragmatism and practicality in dealing with change

*The kitchen's not urbane. The past has not been excised here
or wittily selected. It has gradually shifted outwards
from the centre. Or held. The blender on the laminex*

reflects timber, and a tea caddy. (34)

There is a rightness about Athol Dunn's world. 'An understood world is a tuneable receiver' (37).

At first the boys are wary, not at their ease, in these unfamiliar surroundings, just as they themselves are looked on with suspicion and something approaching hatred by some of the country people, who watch closely for signs of city condescension. But Forbush especially, is not an ordinary city type and his experience in the farming country becomes a kind of education through example and contrast. Here Forbush has confirmed what he had already intuited from watching and listening to his father, the university intellectual who sends off experience by means of abstraction and fashionable stance' — learns that it is class-consciousness and class-talk which abstract and divide people from one another. The country is not immune from such ideas (there is the 'Burning Man' with his obsessive talk of union organization and his abstractions and his hatred (35)), but such intellectualising is seen as essentially a city phenomenon. Out among the scattered farms and hamlets what the boys experience for the first time in their lives, is the cohesiveness of a community, not the divisiveness of 'class consciousness'. Not that the country community is idealized (though some will no doubt think it is). Pettiness and thoughtless cruelty exist here too, symbolized by the snake which has been caught and tormented by children and left to struggle and die in the road (51).

An important character in the story is the dead man himself, Clarence Dunn, who speaks in a kind of after-death reverie. Dunn is important because he focuses one of the recurring themes of *The Boys* — the impact of Gallipoli and the First World War on the Australian consciousness. For Clarrie the War was 'Literature' (54), it was his education in humanity which forced him to the recognition of fundamental truths. But it also destroyed him, or at least left him with a wound that would not heal. As in *The Waste Land*, historic past and the present co-exist in this sequence: for Clarrie's own musings on the War are juxtaposed with the violent rejection of the 'Digger myth' by ultra-feminist Noeline Kampff and Forbush Sr. By them, Clarrie and his kind are dismissed in fashionable clichés ('Murder in uniform' (65)), serving only as a butt for their own political and social abstractions. At the same time they are irrelevant to them as people, just as the country people are irrelevant — not part of the programme and therefore 'obscene', 'deaf' and 'blind' (63). So Kampff and Stacey Forbush feel free to talk rudely and insultingly before them, as if they did not exist. As indeed for them, they do not.

But Clarrie Dunn's life is presented in other terms, by the narrator, through the reminiscence of those who knew him, and in his own reverie. After the War he could not settle back into civilian life, but drifted from job to job, searching for the fellowship of the lost platoon, 'wedded' to the dead men he left on the wire and in the trenches. His life remained incomplete and unfulfilled as a result of his suffering in war. For Murray rejects sharply the patriotic idea that war can be ennobling in itself — and the cynical one that it is a necessary blood-letting.

The poem is nevertheless deeply sacramental in its view of human life and suffering. Shortly before the funeral service, as the procession winds toward the church, we are given an eagle's-eye view of the scene. This is an imaginative stroke on Murray's part. Clarence has become flesh, part of the process, of which the eagle too is a part.

Human meat went into the pointed house
today, as a log with blinding silver crustings;
flesh, like she (the eagle) found once underneath a tractor. (67)

But for Murray a human being is more than flesh, more than a part of the natural process (though he or she is that too). The funeral is a Roman Catholic one, and in his address to the congregation, Father Mulhern penetrates to the heart of this story. Clarence, he reminds his listeners, was a soldier. As such his 'singleness', his integrity of body and spirit, was ruined, since all soldiers put 'part of their trust in what they died fighting'. Such a man's integrity is inevitably compromised. But 'a godless integrity' is a form of ruin too, so that 'We may end, either way, sacrificing everything to anything'. To turn from the source of 'human grace', which the soldier may experience in battle, 'is to enter death's arena'.

There follows the celebration of the Mass, which re-enacts God's self-sacrifice. The ritual is exact: 'the priest does measured things/ with crusts and with cups and blessings'. But although the coffin 'pounds/ like a long bomb at the altar', as if in accusation, 'the menaced Mass-bell rings', and 'food that solves the world is eaten'. The moment achieves a stillness and a centrality which is in and outside of time; which unites the here and now of the communicants' lives, the pain of human suffering, and the mystery of God's sacrifice:

humans are stilled, the worlds are linked
and the crusted Mass-bell rings.

The action revolves around this key sonnet (70), which is appropriately, though unobtrusively, placed at the centre of the sequence of 140 sonnets.

The moment is not one of peace, however, for Reeby and Kevin Forbush. As the congregation emerges into the sunlight, there recurs to Reeby a waking nightmare which has haunted him all day, of escaped lions roaming the streets, 'who would hunt them down (he asks himself) we are burying the riflemen' (71). Kevin has a similar vision of random violence, imagining his father and Noeline Kampf

moving among the unfashionable and the old
and killing them, with neat blades and with sexy
brushed-metal submachine guns...
We are not doing this! they cry with sudden anger,
We are bringing the future! (72).

The boys (I think) have not partaken of the Mass, they have only witnessed it and have not entered its peace. The images of violence that come to their minds outside the church stem from this.

As the burial ends, the police arrive, and the boys escape into the forest. There they meet a group of local men around a fire, and the poem shifts from the plane of religious mystery to the hard facts of everyday life. The men are in varying degrees bitter and resentful at the changes that have overtaken them whether they like it or not. City ways and attitudes have penetrated deep into the country. They take their revenge on Reeby and Forbush: 'Can you sing a song [asks one] Or do you trip and bodge /with a dummy in your earhole, clicking with your fingers?' (78). But the men are deracinated in their way too. They have no songs themselves, for the old songs have passed with the old way of life. When one of them does eventually sing, it is a bitter, self-ironic satire about how the countrymen have been cheated of their inheritance by the sharp operators from the city (81).

Reeby thinks he could nevertheless be 'free' if he stayed on in the country, odd-jobbing. Freedom needs space, he decides. But that is the city dweller's, Bob Dylan, sixties'

abstraction of freedom. Freedom, as the bitter farmers' union organiser knows, means association with a particular patch of land.

*How can you be free? says the Burning Man,
You haven't got a place. And sips hot tea. (83)*

From now on events move fast. The boys become involved in the running of illegally-killed beef, learning of yet another insiad of an impersonal officialdom on the true freehold of the small owner-farmer; men who co-operate with Cotton, the illegal slaughterer, even though they dislike him, partly because he is one of their own and partly because they hate the city-based 'Sir Angus Beef-Bayonets' who are slowly forcing them off the land by imposing on them impossible rules and regulations (85).

Like Eliot, Murray puts to good use the technique of interfacing the contemporary with historical, religious and mythological layers of experience in these and the following stanzas. Kevin's growing involvement in the community and its problems causes him to think back to an earlier conversation with his uncle, Charlie, musing on the Great War, recalled that it was more than 'Literature' and patriotism, it was also 'the common dish' of human suffering, which all are offered and which transcends class: 'long-handled spoons, gold spoons, poor spoons of tin — / Starvation and shame not to eat. Yet it's difficult food' (91). It is also the food which Jesus blessed and 'devoured... whole'. You need not go far to find it. Kevin is beginning to learn; it is all about you; but it is there significantly in the sacrament of the Eucharist which celebrates and enacts the moments when the god himself tasted human suffering. Kevin however has yet to perceive and understand this.

This important stanza is followed by a conversation with the living dead. Kevin comes across his father and Noeline Kampff on a picnic. Forbuit Sr. cannot see anything beyond his own carefully approved (because fashionable) stances. He is, it becomes clear, unable to give himself, because he has nothing to give (92-4). This is the hell of Eliot's 'hallow men', where Noeline Kampff walks with her haunted, measuring eyes' (93). She, unlike Stacey Forbuit, suffers, but it is not the suffering that refines and purifies, for she is unwilling or unable to eat at the common dish. Mary Moorman's comment on Wordsworth's 'ethical discovery that suffering, when illuminated by love, creates its own nobility of heart',⁵ seems relevant here. When burdened with hate and self-disgust however, suffering creates an enclosed hell.

These scenes with Kampff and Forbuit Sr. are interlaced with the gradual growth of adolescent love between Reeby and Jenny Dunn, Athol Dunn's daughter. For Reeby, though, there is to be no salvation. As the boys drive a consignment of illegal meat to the city, they are stopped by the police. Reeby's suppressed fear and rage well to the surface, and he is shot after a meaningless altercation with the patrolman (116-18).

Forbuit escapes into the forest where he eventually collapses in a state of exhaustion and delirium. Only now, at the limits of his being, is he initiated into a new way of perceiving and understanding. In a world which is both dream and real, he meets 'the Njimbin' and 'Birrugan' (or Birrgan/Birigan — the name keeps changing). They are black men, though Birrgan introduces himself as Irish, and they talk in the racist idiom of the swagman:

My name is Birrgan, I'm Irish, says the black man,
this here's the Njimbin: a dreadful mob, this baward
Njimbin, says the diamond-patterned man. Fuck but you're ignorant! (121)

The dialogue continues in this way, and only gradually does the reader realise that they are in fact Aboriginal deities, and that Forbuit is to be initiated by them.

The idiomatic language, larded with expletives, and the often comic edge to the dialogue, is a stroke of genius on Murray's part. One of the most difficult things in modern poetry is the use of myth belonging to another culture, or myth from the distant past of our own. Too often the result is pointedly academic, or reverts to nineteenth-century romantic fantasy: either way the poem becomes overloaded with significance and lies dead on the page. But the Njimbiri and Birrigan are earthed in the here and now by their witty, contemporary speech. They are swagmen as well as deities; and a kind of modern high comedy develops as they prepare Kevin for ritual circumcision and sub-incision (122). Because of this, the ritual is given a kind of validity grounded in everyday experience; it is not forced upon the poem; it is not a learned abstraction.

Forbuit's initiation is excruciatingly painful, but nevertheless, the spirit suggests, it is preferable to the solutions of modern society: 'humane' psycho-therapy, for example, or war:

Wars the very wasteful way of doing this, says the Njimbiri.
it kills too many novices, stuns more, exceeds efficiency. (122)

Forbuit is given the gift of a crystal which is a refractor and reflector of light and a 'gyroscope of balance' (124). He has been illumined, and granted a new clarity of vision. This is then put to the test as he is taken up, like Scipio, to a great height to view Australia, the island-continent, spread out beneath him. Here his instruction is continued. 'Human life', says the Njimbiri, 'isn't in governments, it is in holdings/ of literal and spiritual farming', or else (and here Clarrie and Forbuit Sr. and Noeline seem to meet) 'it's in platoons, remnant, cheerful, deadly dangerous,/ denied singular week, we're drawn to them' (127).

At this point Clarrie enters the clearing bearing the 'common dish', dented and encrusted. It is the dish of willing surrender to a full humanity that will involve much suffering and bitterness; and will demand much humility – but which is the only way to fulfilment and the wisdom of fulfilment.

You may scorn your nation – eat well, consume approved objects,
you may talk screw-language: Rights – Relationships – Consensus –
Accept, and you'll know the pride of lifelong frustration,
of cutting your childhood forest to feed your children –

Refuse, and the depths of your happiness may be spared you.
Taste – and you'll taste the blood in your adventures. (130)

Forbuit's father and mother, and Noeline Kampff, all failed in one way or another. Kevin's 'kind act' to his dead uncle, which went against the grain of contemporary society with its insistence on abstract entities instead of the individuality of personal response – this one act was the spring which released him into levels of experience and illumination that come to fulfilment here.

Kevin is eventually found, delirious and semiconscious, in the hills, and is returned to the rural community and time present. These things have been happening too. Jenny has scalded Noeline horribly in the face with boiling water, in revenge for Reeby's death which she believed Kampff had indirectly caused. Jenny's action closes her off for ever

from the community and she prepares to leave for the city:

*For my punishment
I'll go where she came from*

*My friend and I never made love.
Other men will take me* (135)

The action of the boys brought tragedy and death into the community — part of the bitterness of the common dish. Others (Forbush Sr. for example) remain unchanged. Kevin however has been initiated, he remains behind to farm the small-holding Clarrie had refused after returning from the Great War.

The Boys Who Stole the Funeral is an achievement. Not only has Les Murray reintroduced the art of story-telling into poetry, he has extended the possibilities of the sonnet sequence, and evolved a robust, versatile style which can encompass the vigour of colloquial speech and plain narrative as well as lyric grace. Even more, he has created an Australian myth that successfully fuses Christian and Aboriginal religious traditions which meet on the common ground of human suffering and how it may be transcended; and all within the flux of modern life with its urban catering. So politics, agriculture, war, violence, city deracination and class against community are threaded through the poem like strands in a tapestry, to be given final significance in the universal symbol of the common dish. This book places Les Murray among a handful of poets writing in English today who need to be read.

JOHN BARNIE

NOTES

1. Published by Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1980.
2. Numerical references are to individual sonnets in the sequence.
3. Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth, A Biography: The Early Years 1770-1803* (Oxford 1957, repr. 1969) p. 500.

David Malouf, *First Things Last*. University of Queensland Press, 1980.

David Malouf is a not quite expatriate novelist and poet who divides his time between Tuscany and Australia. In recent years his novels have won a wide international following, and his poetry has also been closely watched since his impressive third collection *Neighbours in a Thicket* (1974), which marked the maturing of his powers. Less lucid than A.D. Hope, less concrete and less obviously Australian than Les Murray or Bruce Dawe, he excels in the delineation of subtle emotions and intuitions, backed by a cosmopolitan culture.

Reviewers in Australia have been divided over whether the current collection is a

consolidation or a disappointment. To my mind it passes easily a fairly strenuous assay which I call 'the Nabokov test': that is, that any good poem should contain three or four sentences as felicitous as one might find in an average paragraph from Nabokov's novels. Malouf excels in evocative phrases.

Thus his opening poem, 'The Wild Lemons', speaks of 'a scent of lemons/ run wild in another country, but smelling always of themselves ...their sunlight...sliced/ for drinks', and evokes evenings when

a flute tempts out a few
reluctant stars to walk over the water
and a famous beard, benignly condescending,
looks on.

Often the images derive from his love of music:

As when a songbird sketches
three notes on the air: one
then another at a tangent;
then the first found new again.

He can restore the freshness, too, to a jaded city-landscape as in

Dawn flares along the edge of an office block: knife-
like unseals an envelope
the new day delivers.

or can conjure up the nightmares of women in time of war:

A single shadow
sways over our heads, dropping
dead leaves into
the hands of all those women:
a tree of telegrams.

But the Nabokov test has a corollary. The author of *Lebanon* did not merely collect his immaculate sentences on handwritten filing-cards: he later sorted and arranged those filing-cards into coherent novels. Malouf is not so invulnerable on the issue of coherence. Far more often than I think wise, he leaves the reader wondering whether he or she has stupidly missed a connection — or whether the author simply has a lax notion of what sorts of diverse materials can be mingled in a poem.

➤ What holds his best piece together is a mystical vision of the Earth in its simplicity:

The world as if
after rain. Things wear their instant
original sheen.

or

The road climbs uphill into
the sun. It is
earth worn flat
with footsteps.

Here Malouf deals in the same sorts of feeling he explored in his brilliant novel *An Imaginary Life* where the Roman poet Ovid, exiled among non-Latin speakers, is forced to throw away his defences of words and meet the world afresh.

Occasionally he moves into more complex forms, as in his most substantial piece, 'Elegy: The Absences', where he addresses his father:

You bore my image long enough, the promise
of it, looking clean through the bodies
of women to where I stood beside the river
waiting, pitching stones. No wonder I stand there
still. No wonder I bear the image of you
back through the bodies
of women, strangers, searching for the one
door I must come through.

Yet there are some false notes in these poems. One that contains images as fresh as 'Over the flat land the sky/ moves mountains of breath' can degenerate into the pure Auden-esque of

Expected, it will appear like any other
at the proper hour, inheriting its weather
from last night's stars.

W.H.A. seems indeed to be Malouf's King Charles' head, and turns up at the most unexpected moments:

turning
away in wisps of windblown cloud that leaves us
trampolining high out of the smog
but leaves us just the same and who is happy
to be the same or left?

It is a mistake to think that Auden's style can be updated by making his daring jumps of thought more reckless, as in

Out of the dark
we bring these fictions forth to explain ourselves
before bicycles and clocks. The dynasties
are marked out on our palm, heroes enter
as a minor itch, and island cities melt
on the tongue. The body's syntax is baroque...

— even though Auden's golden voice sometimes carried off stuff almost as senescent as this.

More worrying still are certain slick literary tricks that erode belief in the emotions Malouf asserts. In fact several poems, including 'The Carpenter's Shed', 'The Ladders', and 'The Martyrdom in Room Fourteen', conclude with assertions of transcendent emotion that seem ill justified by what goes before.

For me the turnaround point was a long sequence called 'The Crab Feast', apparently about the mangrove crabs of Malouf's native Brisbane. It has a fine opening, but overall the mudcrab proves a diffuse and watery fellow.

First-rate poetry makes, and justifies, surprising connections of thought. Sometimes Malouf gets the mix right, as in

Among mangrove trunks the fire-
flies like small hot low-crawled
planets switch on

switch off.

but mostly the connections in this poem veer between the unsurprising and the unsustainable. One of numerous examples of the latter is when the view of crabs performing a ritual battle like 'soundless tank engagements' provokes the comment

you might be angels
in the only condition
our senses reach them in.

The later poems in this book struck me as far less satisfying than the earlier ones. They not only do not add to the value of the collection, but actually send you back to re-read in a more querulous mood poems that had seemed genuine enough on a first reading. To read the second half of *First Things Last* is to realise how much our tolerance of certain eccentricities in major poets like Eliot and Auden depends on our belief that these eccentricities are genuinely part of the poet's nature.

The problem is that so many of these poems suffer from the dominance of words over things

To lie tight-wrapped in butcher's
paper and bleed
events: you all know this one,
it's *Learning from History*

This is clever, but highly derivative writing. It has, as the Lewisites would say, no pretence of felt experience behind it. By the second half of the book one starts to hunger for something real. A prose poem titled 'A Poor Man's Guide to Southern Tuscany' raises delusive hopes. But it opens, 'There are many voyages to be made in this room. It is an air-balloon, a yacht, an island among other islands, hot on occasion as Sumatra, when...' — and the reader realises with a sigh that he is in for lots of literary cleverness, and precious little Southern Tuscany.

It is evident that Malouf is having trouble finding — or perhaps hearing — his own voice. The lyric simplicity which is his real strength sometimes gets in the way of his intellectualising tendency (which can also be a strength), and both are seriously corrupted by some unfortunate fashion-following that leads him into those surreal regions

where words become their own referents. And yet how good Makouf can be at his best.

A voice wading
adagio through air, high, clear, wordless, opens perspectives
in the deepest silence.

MARK O'CONNOR

THREE CANADIAN POETS

Kenneth Sherman, *The Cost of Living*. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1981. 55 pages.

Mary Di Michele, *Mimosa and Other Poems*. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1981. 46 pages.

Andy Wainwright, *After the War*. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1981. 65 pages.

Kenneth Sherman's second collection is divided into two sections, 'History' and 'The Cost of Living'. 'History' begins with a reworking of Genesis in which the myth of the Fall is reduced to a bad joke, God is demythologized, and the serpent presented as an innocent victim. Ted Hughes's Genesis poems in *Wodwo* and *Crow* come to mind, but Sherman does not have control of the material in quite the same way: his versions are merely debunking, the language too slangy ('The new God laid on the serpent: / was bad and was forever'), giving the poem a contemporaneity which will soon seem dated.

As the sequence develops, though, through poems on Cain, Lot's wife and Joseph to modern times, the tone changes. Lot's wife turns to question God about the suffering she bears in the burning city; Joseph reflects that slaves are 'the anonymous pages/ history turns', and in the poem 'History' the narrator prays for release from the world and from redemption as set out in Christian terms. Life is not like Plato's cave with its shadows promising something other and perfect, it is a pit or a grave where suffering human flesh is tossed — Polish Jews, Nagasaki, Japanese atrocities in the Philippines are invoked. The poet emphatically rejects this God and the path to salvation 'where the body is roasted/ on the spirit's spit'.

The meaning of the title of this section now becomes clear. The inexorable demands of God as imaged in the Old Testament, the lost innocence, the endless slaughter and cruelty, all come to a head in the Second World War for Sherman, in the obscenity of the camps which makes language inadequate ('Gutenberg', 'A Christmas Song'). From a weak beginning this sequence is refined into such hard-edged poems as 'Ghosts' where the poet, haunted by the ghosts of the three million Jews killed by the Nazis in Poland, knows that even the memory of their suffering will eventually fade:

In Spain, where the ghosts
are 500 years old,
their faces are less definable
their screams fainter

and by the ruins of the Second Temple
they are simply light
upon stone.

The second part of this collection continues the frightening and frightened modern sense that innocence is over, that we live in an unredeemed and unredeemable world, trapped like the bear in 'The Sun is Chained to the Sky':

All night I'll hear his groans
as he widens his wound
to tear himself free.

There are good poems here too — 'A Shape of Hook', for example, where the poet as a boy hooks a fish through the eye, and experiences for the first time the horror of suffering inflicted on another living being. *The Cost of Living* ends with a series of satirical pieces on lawyers, hack teachers, the idle rich. This is light verse, attractive enough in itself, but attacking easy targets. The collection, which contains some strong poems, would have been better without these.

Mimosa and Other Poems, Mary Di Michele's new collection, opens with the title poem which explores the relationship between an Italian immigrant father and his two daughters who have grown up in Canada. 'Mimosa' is in three parts, an indirectly related account of the father's hopes and disappointments in his daughters, and a monologue each by the two women. Marta remains closest to the traditional Italian model of womanhood, bound by family pieties and the church, yet dissatisfied with her lot and envious of her sister Lucia who is the modern, aware woman trying to define herself anew through experience, not through the imposed images that society forces in various ways on women.

This is an ambitious poem, almost 16 pages in length, but like so many longer modern poems it fails ultimately at the level of style. Mary Di Michele has not succeeded in developing a middle style which could carry such an extended sequence, and the result is too often a rather thin, unmemorable prose disguised as verse. For example:

He tries to improve the English he learned in classes
for new Canadians by reading the daily papers. (p.2)

So much of my life has been wasted feeling guilty
about disappointing my father and mother.
It makes me doubt myself.
It's impossible to live my life that way. (p.13)

In great poetry the reader is stirred by the language, by rhythm, sound and image, below conscious perception. So much modern verse does not even attempt this but remains merely a vehicle for the expression of ideas or experience, so that this primitive, elemental quality is lost. For me this is the case here. The language of 'Mimosa' is anchored in the commonplace, and it is difficult to see why it was set out as verse.

With this style there goes, in the post-war years, belief in a certain kind of confession-
alism; belief that the incidents of our daily lives are somehow of significance in them-
selves, rather than the raw material which has to be refined and metamorphosed into

poetry. Vito, the father, in near old age, is a sad, interesting man, but no more so than others we know from our own lives. Too few poets in recent years have taken Eliot's advice that 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality'.

The second part of this collection consists of shorter, lyric poems. Many deal with marriage and the bitterness of failure in marriage. 'The Story of a Marrying Man' is a good poem on the theme of dominance in men-women relationships, centering on the fine image of the woman as fruit to be eaten, to be consumed in various ways. 'Ice' is an even better piece about the failure of marriage, where the image of eating occurs again: this time an evening meal, which is a strained, frigid occasion, not the celebration it should be. Ice is at the heart of this relationship which exists without love, while longing for it:

Later we sleep in the bed we love
and I dream of white glaciers
like needles given to the blue arms of the sea,
and he dreams of blue waves breaking
into white foam.

Inevitably the spectre of Sylvia Plath haunts these poems on divorce and failed marriage, Plath at her most intensely personal and bitter, not the Plath who subsumed her experience into something deeper and universal. Too often there is a sense of *déjà vu* (in 'Bitches and Vampires' for example, or 'White Lies' and 'The Germination of Envy'); a sense of Plath's mastery of this theme and style lying uncomfortably behind Di Michele's work. She needs to break this spell and mature a style of her own. There are indications in several of the poems here that she is more than capable of doing this.

Andy Wainwright's *After the War* comes out of the same stable as the work of the Liverpool poets, Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan, international in style, often witty and light in its handling of themes, the kind of verse that goes down well at readings. The opening poems relate to the Aegean islands, especially Lesbos. They are mostly tourist poems — postcards home — existing on the outside of the community, culture and landscape they describe. This comes over at the level of language. The opening verse of 'Yannis' Song', for example, which is put in the mouth of a Greek fisherman:

I plied my nets without regret
before the moon was full
nets filled with fish
that shone beneath the moon
the fish of all my years...

Here the use of the archaic 'plied' sets the tone. It is a false note, as is the clumsy-'profound' metaphor of the last line.

There is in fact little sense of place in these poems or in the two concluding stories set in Ibiza and Lesbos. Rather we have the free-wheeling international youth cult of the late 60s — a world of endless travel, casual sex (to be boasted about afterwards), spear-fishing, drinking in tourist village cafés and playing out the role of 'poet' — more trash and out of place than the tourists themselves.

Other poems reveal a similar 60s Liverpool/pop cleverness. 'In the Quiet Morning' is a

play on the idea of waking up at dawn, waking into your life again, as if it were a story being written by someone else. You have to wait and watch the writing to see how it will unfold. Art and reality, art and life. But there is little more here than the clever manipulation of an idea:

you want to tell these people
of your freedom
wherever it is
you are this character
in this story of a life...

Several poems are about teenage love, the experience of outliving a relationship, and memory of the beloved (pp.28-33). They use the I-you form of address which does not make the experience universal, but merely anonymous. Too often in this collection the poems deal in poses and are written in a mock-serious tone which suggests a certain kind of knowingness rather than profundity. 'Resistance Poem' begins:

O lord
I want to assume nothing
reach me
to assume nothing...

The language echoes that of Eliot in 'Ash Wednesday' and 'Four Quartets', but here it is a piece of mock religiosity. Wainwright doesn't believe in God (or god): it is merely a clever opening to a fashionable appeal to pacifism.

JOHN BARNIE

Abraham Sutzkever, *Burnt Pearls, Ghetto Poems*, trans. from the Yiddish by Seymour Mayne, introduction by Ruth R. Wisse. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1981. 51 pages.

Seymour Mayne, *The Impossible Promised Land*. Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 1961. 123 pages.

Abraham Sutzkever wrote most of these poems while trapped in the Vilna ghetto between 1941 and 1943. His experience there would have destroyed the creativity of many poets: in Sutzkever it brought to maturity a remarkable talent. 'In the Cell', the opening poem, begins with the near-despair of someone isolated and in darkness: 'Is there something human here or familiar?' he asks. Then he finds a fragment of glass, 'chipped by someone's hand'. For a moment he considers whether this is a sign to commit suicide: 'I stroke the sharp lunar edge and ask: / "Do you want me offered up as a gift?"' He answers his own question however, in a direct and typical way: 'But blood is hot, the glass — cold, / and it's a shame to take the sliver to my throat.' Sutzkever here, and in poem after

poem, chooses life; just as he was later to break out of the ghetto and fight with the partisans rather than submit to a passive death at the hands of the Germans. In 'A Voice from the Heart' the poet keeps alive his belief in justice by reminding himself that 'Death pardons every error, / but slavery it never forgives'.

An important way of keeping faith with his humanity was the affirmation of life through his art. To avoid a Nazi round-up he lies in a coffin's 'stiff wooden clothing' where he is able to assert — triumphantly, as the poem itself bears witness — that 'my speech / still moves into song' ('I Am Lying in this Coffin'). Taking a piece of bloodstained bread from a fellow-Jew shot on the barbed wire — one more necessity which might lead to despair — is turned again into a rite of consecration and affirmation by Sutzkever:

If I fall as you fell
at the barbed wire
let another swallow my word
as I, your bread.

(*'For a Comrade'*)

In 'Mother', a sequence on his murdered mother, love triumphs over fear and outrage and hatred. The poem has at its centre an almost unspeakable suffering, yet it affirms a humanity which cannot be destroyed by Nazi atrocity. The last poem in the sequence is spoken by the dead mother, persuading her son to accept their separation as 'just':

If you remain
I will still be alive
as the pit of the plum
contains in itself the tree,
the nest and the bird
and all else besides.

Deeply rooted in these poems is a sense of nature as a restorative force. This is profoundly present in the imagery. His mother, stripped naked and chased by the German tormentors through the fields, becomes 'a beam of sun in the mirrors of snow'. His murdered infant son's body he bequeaths to the snow:

and you will sink
like a splinter of dusk
into its quiet depth
and bear greetings from me
to the frozen grasslands ahead —

(*'For My Child'*)

A neighbour, whipped by the Germans for trying to smuggle a flower into the ghetto, has no regrets: 'spring breathes through and colours his tortured flesh — / that's how much he wanted it to flourish' ('Flower').

I regret that I cannot read Sutzkever's work in Yiddish, Seymour Mayne's translations are true poems in themselves, however. The collection is prefaced by a fine introduction by Ruth R. Wisse.

In *The Impassible Promised Land*, Seymour Mayne's tenth collection, there seems to be

an abstract quality to many of the poems. The imagery itself is somehow faceless, as if trying to identify someone or something from its abstract parts. So the sea, a lover, a friend make their appearance without the reader ever feeling that they have a reality, anchored in the blood and sinew of particular imagery, and in the tensions and rhythms of an individual poetic style. 'Vernal Equinox' is typical of what I mean. It begins:

For stems of light
hold out your hand
O hand with spokes
Speak
of the needles
of sun piercing
the center of palm
Palm, balm
of sound, prayer...

Elsewhere the language is flat and chaty: 'David, I ate at your place/ years ago when I had next to nothing' ('David'). The language of poetry should be tighter than this, and at times Mayne does reach out into a greater precision of imagery and rhythm, as in 'Skull Tower, Nis', a poem on the tower of Serbian skulls built by the Turks:

Gate gate
battered Serbs
You ended serving the Turks well
who decapitated
skinned and scraped off
the fleshy faces
and cemented you all
to hold up these exemplary walls...

Many poems in Part Two are about Jerusalem and about his own feelings and reflections as a Jew. There are, too, poems of memory, the memory of the older generation's tales of suffering and hardship in central Europe. But it is hard to handle this sort of material when it has only been experienced at second hand. Somehow many of these poems lack the conviction of felt experience. Historically they are true; poetically they do not come alive. There is a suspicion that for Mayne and perhaps for his generation of Jews in Canada, the faith which was so deeply rooted for their grandparents in the Yiddish culture of central Europe, is something learned and set at a distance. Mayne writes in English and in an international style with its roots in North America. Behind him lies, not hundreds of years of Yiddish literary tradition, but W.C. Williams and the Black Mountain poets. Yiddish and Hebrew words and rituals are liberally sprinkled through the poems, but have to be explained in a page of notes. This gives many of them a slightly strained quality. Poems such as 'City of the Hidden', a sequence centred on Jerusalem, do not seem to come out of a lived Jewish culture, but out of the longing for one. As an outsider I may be wrong in this, but compared with Sutskover's poems, the result in Mayne's work seems all too often a simulacrum of the real thing.

JOHN BARNIE

Stories from the Raj. From Kipling to Independence, selected and introduced by Saros Cowasjee, London: The Bodley Head, 1982. 272 pages. £7.50.

'This anthology... has been put together to question the oft-repeated assertions by critics that Anglo-Indian fiction has little of literary value outside Kipling. Forster and Orwell,' writes Saros Cowasjee in his introduction to this collection of short stories. In order to challenge these assertions he has cast his net very widely indeed. In time it spans some seventy years, from the Kipling era of the last century to just after Independence in 1947. The setting ranges even more widely, moving from the North-West frontier right across the sub-continent to Burma. Cowasjee's haul of writers includes amongst it such well-known ones as Kipling and Orwell (two stories from each for good measure) as well as many others like Maud Diver, Sara Jeanette Duncan and Lionel James, whose names will probably either be completely new to many readers or, at best, half-forgotten. It is, in fact, no small part of the value of this collection that Cowasjee has brought these writers out from the shadows and helped focus our attention on them once again. Moreover, and perhaps most welcome of all, he reminds us that Anglo-Indian fiction was not something only written by men — almost half of the stories included here are written by women. Consequently he brings home to us the fact that, although the memsahibs of the Raj have often, in recent times, been a much reviled species, they did nevertheless make a substantial contribution to its literature.

Diversity, then, is one of the key-notes of this anthology, and consideration of the literary merits of each of the stories has been the principle guiding his choice of what to include. This has been carried out, inevitably perhaps, at the cost of some consistency. Thus these stories from the Raj include Orwell, even though both of his stories are actually set in Burma. However, Burma, as Cowasjee says, was very much a part of the British Raj and was for a long time even administered from Calcutta. The term 'Anglo-Indian' also affords him some slight local difficulty. He uses it in its original sense of the British in India, though this merely compounds his problem: all of the writers, he remarks, are British — except three. (Actually, there are four, if one includes Sara Jeanette Duncan, who was born in Ontario.) The problem is solved by a fairly deft sleight of hand when Cowasjee adds that, though these writers are not really British, nevertheless 'they are in their attitude and approach to India completely un-Indian'. Consequently, he concludes — by now quite superbly — 'their inclusion in this anthology poses no problems'.

An editor must nonetheless be allowed some considerable latitude, and faced with the very real merits of this anthology few readers will quarrel with his refusal to be restricted in his choice by narrower questions of geography, birthplace or nationality.

What then are its merits? They can perhaps be angled out when Cowasjee reiterates that 'the stories have been selected primarily for their literary qualities and only secondarily for their social importance'. Here in fact Cowasjee does himself, as editor, and many of his stories, less than justice, for it is surely precisely in the way that many of the stories combine literary value with social significance which provides much of the interest of and even justification for this collection.

The attitude to the British Raj depicted in this volume covers a wide spectrum of opinion. It stretches in fact from the era when India was regarded without question as the brightest jewel in a glittering crown to that time when the setting came to seem a very tarnished one indeed. It moves, figuratively, from all the pomp and circumstance of the

Rajpath in Delhi when surveyed from the elephants' howdahs of any Imperial procession to the 'labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts' in 'Shooting an Elephant' where Orwell is shamefacedly forced by the imperial creed to kill his defenceless animal.

At one end of the spectrum represented here, then, stands Orwell. For him the imperial system is quite unequivocally an evil institution and the only thing his job in Burma as part of the system does for him is to give him the opportunity of seeing, as he remarks in 'Shooting an Elephant', 'the dirty work of Empire at close quarters'. In this story the narrator describes an incident that seemed trivial in itself, 'but it gave me,' he remarks, 'a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism'. He is forced into killing the animal, he now regards as harmless, simply because to draw back will entail an irrecoverable loss of face before the crowd of Burmese villagers watching the encounter, 'I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. . . He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. . . A sahib has got to act like a sahib, he has got to appear resolute.'

At the other end of the spectrum looms — inevitably — Kipling. His commitment to the British Empire is total. The English are in India to rule — and to serve. Through unwavering devotion to the Imperial ideal and by facing the challenge it presents, Englishmen are given the opportunity of fulfilling themselves, of showing strength of character and self-development. Orwell's hollow dummy in fact reveals his true stuff. The sahib does indeed wear a mask in Kipling's stories, but it is not only his face that grows to fit it, so too does his whole stature as a man. And the features that mark the sahib for Kipling are resolution, unflinching self-sacrifice when called for, an unquestioning devotion to duty without thought of reward or ulterior self interest.

In 'The Head of the District', one of the two stories by which Kipling is represented here, a Bengali, Mr Ghriah Chunder DE, M.A. has been sent, on the recommendation of an 'enlightened' Viceroy, to take over the post of Deputy Commissioner of a district, formerly held by an Englishman. A local Pathan leader, Khoda Dad Khan, protests against the decision vehemently to the Bengali's chief assistant, an Englishman: 'O Sahab, has the Government gone mad to send a black Bengali dog to us? And am I to pay service to such a one? And are you to work under him? What does it mean?' 'It is an order,' said Tallentire.

A local blind Mullah, arguing that because a Bengali has been sent to govern them they need no longer fear British rule, incites the local tribesmen to attack and plunder some villages. The attack is ward off by a British detachment, many of the tribesmen are killed, and Khoda Dad Khan seizes the opportunity to pay off some old scores against the Mullah. The passage is worth quoting at some length:

Then began a game of blind-man's-buff round and between the fires... They tickled him gently under the armpit with the knife-point. He leaped aside screaming; only to feel a cold blade drawn lightly over the back of his neck, or a rifle muzzle rubbing his beard. He called on his adherents to aid him, but most of these lay dead on the plains, for Khoda Dad Khan had been at some pains to arrange their decease. Men described to him the glories of the shrine they would build, and the little children clapping their hands cried, 'Run, Mullah, run! There's a man behind you!' In the end, when the sport wearied, Khoda Dad Khan's brother sent a knife home between his ribs. 'Wherefore,' said Khoda Dad Khan with charming simplicity, 'I am now Chief of the Rhuwa Khely!'

The game of blind-man's-buff described here with such delighted gusto appears at first

sight a very far cry from the Great Game dealt with in Kipling's other works, but it has a connection, nevertheless. This single story in fact speaks volumes about the real state of mind underlying Kipling's attitude to the Raj. Perhaps, though, this is revealed most tellingly in the unmistakably vindictive note of approval which greets the final dispatch of an enemy of the Raj. Charming simplicity! Yes, indeed; Orwell's experience of a sudden insight into the true nature of imperialism is one that need not only be confined to him. A similar opportunity is offered to the reader by the fact that Cowasjee includes these two stories in the same volume.

Nor is Kipling's story the only one that acquires an added significance by being included in this collection and seen in the context of the whole. Many of the others afford the reader a fuller understanding of what life was really like under the Raj and of how many different facets it had. Katherine Mayo, Maud Diver and Flora Annie Steel bring home to the reader the often tragic fate of Indian women. Through these stories we are also reminded that the Raj was not solely responsible for all the ills. Katherine Mayo's 'The Widow', for example, is the victim of the fanaticism of Gandhi's supporters despite their code of *satyagraha*. Maud Diver shows in 'The Gods of the East' that these can be cruel and jealous gods demanding a blood sacrifice for the payment of a debt — a practice that still held sway even though it was long since made punishable under the British penal code. In Leonard Woolf's 'Pearls and Swine' the depths of degradation to which the English in India could sink is clearly revealed. Perhaps, in fact, only too clearly, since this is surely a story that hardly deserves reviving. Cowasjee comments in his introduction upon how closely this is modelled upon 'Heart of Darkness' both in its narrative method and in the depiction of its central character. This is true, unfortunately, since it only serves to bring out even more sharply the comparative weakness, the crude lack of subtlety and of insight, and the facetious quality of Woolf's story.

But of all those writers who have been thus brought out of undeserved neglect the one who stands out most prominently is surely Sara Jeannette Duncan for her story 'A Mother in India'. Full of vivid domestic detail, here we are taken straight into the home-life of the mem-sahib. The mother is a splendidly drawn character, practical, forthright, eminently sensible and clear sighted; her daughter, brought up in England, is prim, prosaic and prudish, she possesses, her mother says truly, 'a frugal mind'. The relationship between them is treated with a completely controlled, subtly poised comedy (at times strongly reminiscent of Henry James), but it is a comedy that does not preclude more serious undertones. A summary, however, cannot do it justice; it must be read in its entirety.

So too must this whole anthology. Saros Cowasjee expresses a hope that the stories chosen for inclusion will lead to a renewed interest in their authors' work in general. One shares his hope — he at least has very ably done his part.

DONALD W. HANNAH

Francis Ebejer, *Come Again in Spring*. New York. Vantage Press, 1979. 196 pages. \$7.50.

Francis Ebejer, *Requiem for a Malta Fascist, (or The Interrogation)*. Malta: A.C. Aquilina & Co., 1980. 243 pages. No price given.

Francis Ebejer, who is probably the best-known contemporary Maltese writer, has here written two strikingly different novels.

Come Again in Spring is set in America and centres upon Miguel, a young man who has left his home on the Canary Islands to live in San Francisco. The novel records his encounter with an America that, inevitably, threatens to undermine and destroy his basically European cultural identity. The theme is a not unfamiliar one, although Ebejer does succeed in investing his account of Miguel's adjustment to America, his new-found-land, with a marked degree of vividness and freshness. These qualities are also enhanced by the pace of the narrative. Miguel's reactions to his new environment are conveyed moment by moment as they are experienced, and, in general, the reader is swept forward on the headlong torrent of his impressions. But pace also exacts a price, for vividness and immediacy are gained at the expense of solidity of background and depth of experience. Both America and its inhabitants really only exist in the novel as fragments of Miguel's consciousness, and, in turn, his character is not at all one that has been sharply etched in. As a result his impressions are like the colours in a kaleidoscope which are ceaselessly running together to form new designs, but never come to rest to make any lasting pattern of significance. As a result we are left in *Come Again in Spring* not so much with the description of a firmly defined cultural identity confronting all the challenge of a strange environment, but rather with the account of a host of fleeting experiences all of which turn out to be fairly ephemeral.

This forms a very striking contrast with *Requiem for a Malta Fascist*. It is also narrated in the first person, but the experiences of Lorenzo, the main character, are utterly different. The novel sketches in his early childhood in a small village on Malta, his school-days and his time as a student during the 1930s in Valletta, his experiences on the island during the Second World War, and his career is then followed until 1974.

The story of Lorenzo's life on Malta during these years is in the foreground of the novel, but equally prominent are the main events of Malta's history during the same period. These extend from the pre-war period, when the country was under British rule and wracked by Fascist intrigues, through all the rigours of the siege of Malta — the George Cross island — during the war, and on to the establishment of Malta as an independent state. All this background to Lorenzo's life is filled in very solidly indeed, and the prose, in which this novel is written, gives itself plenty of time to establish, firmly and surely, all the changing scenes of Malta's life during these times. Perhaps most memorable of all are the descriptions of life on the island, torn and devastated by war, with Valletta bombed again and again by the Axis powers. A woman tells Lorenzo:

'We never miss going down to the shelter. Not once. I even leave the shop open. And I'm always first up here again, before the customers. I've seen some changes these last few months. Who would have thought? Lost a few customers, too. Sa Elvira the laundress. She lived in that house with the high trees in the garden. With her old man who is a scholar, her Angora and Siamese cats. She was in the garden looking for one of her kittens that had strayed up from the shelter when the bomb fell. Her husband, too, had been in the shelter, writing a big book about lizards, skinks, geckos, newts and things like that. He rushed out, but his wife was little pieces, and you know what he did? He went back in, brought out his book, tore it up and threw the pieces on the little fires that were still burning around what was left of his wife. He stood there in his pyjamas bare-headed, sobbing and singing our National Hymn over and over again. He was still singing it when they took him away.'

All these events do, however, only form the background against which the main relationship is played out — that between Lorenzo and his closest friend, Paul, the Malta

Fascist, for whom the book is meant as a requiem. And here, in the description of this relationship, the novel is much less satisfactory. The early stages of the friendship between the two is described in this encounter:

'Your politics disgust me,' I told Paul one Spring day in 1958. In my extreme youth.

My first skin still encased me but it was aglow with the need for the sight of a face, eyes, mouth, sound of a chuckle, a voice (Paul's), without which I could truly see myself unable to live.

'They disgust me because I've seen them turn friends against each other. Only friendship (such as ours) is real and important. Politics (such as yours) debase it. They threaten us like man-eating tigers (they surround us at dead of night). Don't let them.'

He looked resplendent in his fascist uniform.

Paul may well look resplendent in his fascist uniform, but a major flaw in the novel is also suggested here. Although Lorenz's belief that 'only friendship...is real and important' is constantly asserted — and indeed must be, since it provides the pivot around which all the events in Lorenz's life are made to revolve — nevertheless the passion with which this belief is held remains much less convincing. It is, in fact, considerably easier to believe in the smouldering hostility Lorenz feels towards Paul's fascist convictions than to credit the strength of his affection for Paul as a friend. 'If I had to choose,' E.M. Forster once wrote, 'between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.' Lorenz's decision, finally, is the opposite of Forster's — but it still remains difficult to believe, in spite of all his protestations, that the necessity of choosing really causes him much agonized soul-searching.

To find the strength of this book, then, one must look elsewhere than in its account of the personal relationship between the two major characters. And the direction is one that is indicated by the main difference between this novel and *Come Again in Spring*. If in the previous novel America is reduced to a series of transient impressions, in this book the description of Malta is given a durable quality that will ensure it surviving long in the reader's memory. Essentially what it amounts to is that the main character here is neither Paul nor Lorenz, but Malta itself. Thus, despite its title, the book is not so much a requiem for a Malta Fascist, but instead affords a vivid and absorbing glimpse of the life of the island and its stormy existence over the last forty years. And that, after all, is no mean achievement.

DONALD W. HANNAH

Brian Turner, *Ancestors*. Dunedin: John McIndoe, 1981. 62 pages. NZ\$6.95.

Ancestors continues and develops the themes from Brian Turner's first collection *Ladders of Rain*. He is at his best when he describes the hilly, wet, windy, and somewhat bleak countryside and sea around Otago. Blended into this landscape is a feeling for the past, almost as a living presence and at times with a slightly supernatural slant. The tone is often melancholic, but never despairing. What saves it from despair is a low-keyed and very genuine pleasure in simple living and everyday connections. Although his world is beneath lashing rain

Nothing is left untouched by sparse sunlight,
slanting rain, fuz of wind punching

the ribs of the land....

it is an Arcadia of provincial living, of grass-roots lives and obscurity made significant, but not idealized beyond credibility. At its most successful the poetry combines the landscape and emotions into a very genuine kind of beauty:

Coming home late through the smoky
fuz of late autumn, winter rackety
on the elbows of birch trees,
a storm of finches pecking an apple.

I feel some things are never
lost in the conspiracy of evening,
the garnered and gathered
puddling silences of chill air.

The poetry seems less successful when it tries too hard for some kind of 'message', a meaning which in some cases is too ostentatiously tacked on to the end of the poem. An example of this tendency is the poem 'Kites'. It is a light, delightful poem about kites, seen from the point of view of the kites themselves:

Artists like us, and so
do the sober middle-aged,
and the spartan elderly.
We are a favoured lot.

But the last line, 'Such free spirits are never grounded for long', forces a message on to the poem which it cannot and should not carry. This tendency, however, is the only flaw in an otherwise thoroughly enjoyable book of poetry. It is the sort of book one would wish to give to a good friend whom one knew would have no need to discuss it.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

S.H. Burton and C.J.H. Chacksfield, *African Poetry in English. An introduction to practical criticism*. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980. 154 pages. £5.95 h/c. £1.95 ppr.

This is a very thorough and detailed introduction to the art of poetry reading, aimed at A level students, teachers' college students, or first year university students. The authors describe the various tools of poetry and illustrate their points with detailed analyses of poems, all of which are chosen from African poetry. Each chapter also includes questions and suggestions for further analyses of poems. The book thus serves two purposes: it introduces the student to poetry as a form, but seeing that it does so through the medium of African poetry it also becomes an introduction to that particular field. The authors have emphasized this last aspect by adding a short chapter on the development of African poetry to the end of the book. In this double purpose lies the book's uniqueness in the sea of introductions, and it does seem to me to make sound pedagogical sense to introduce a new and much feared field through a medium which has the advantage of being concerned with a world familiar to the student, and in this sense African students have until now been disadvantaged. This introduction could rectify that, and with its heavy emphasis on the enjoyment one can gain from reading poetry, rather than exam cramming, who knows, it might even win some converts to a much maligned genre.

KIRSTEN HÖLST PETERSEN

Kenjo Jumbam, *The White Man of God*. London: Heinemann, 1980. 160 pages. £1.40.

When a Catholic priest (the white man of God) assumes duties at a Nkar parish in Bui, Cameroon, the family, the compound, the village authority, and the narrator are permanently disturbed. A double-consciousness breeds a double participation: the parish catechist serves the Nwaring, the tribe's most powerful institution, as the *Kiburankoh*, its leading juju (in the West African sense of 'masque'). As the narrator, Tansa, develops this simple autobiographical narrative, the parish priest's assistant dies while he himself barely survives the discovery that Matlu, his catechist, is the *Kiburankoh*. Meanwhile the now divided Nkar crofters and the narrator must cope individually with the paradoxes they see in Christianity — especially in the relation of its God and his sinners.

Jumbam's use of a child narrator allows him to indulge the bonding emotions of the tribe and to bring out the texture of the Neo style family and village life. These home scenes are very well done indeed. However, the juvenile perspective is somewhat costly since much must be compressed within the ten years that take Tansa into his teens. Jumbam succeeds even here by carefully admitting Tansa into, or dismissing him from, the presence of more experienced adults. Tansa is thus used occasionally as a probe into the history of the earliest contacts between white travellers and the Nkar folk. This eavesdropping technique is very effectively employed throughout *The White Man of God*.

Much of the comedy that partially sustains the novel accrues from the flavour of the Neo language audible in its 'English'. Matlu is actually a stock character from West African anglophone lore, but he is nevertheless well integrated into this novel as he

translates the New Testament 'rubbers' as 'rubber trees'. Jumbam excels in this art of Africanizing English. His perfect balance of humour and tragedy accounts for much of his success. The African English conflict novel is already well established by the likes of *Things Fall Apart*, but *The White Man of God* is clearly a map of future directions within the genre: less epic and more inward.

TAYOBA NGENGE

Conferences

Projecting Women — Film Festival, Aarhus, 16-20 November 1981.

This women's film festival was organised by Anna Rutherford, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Susan Gardner. The films shown included 'Some American Feminists'; 'Margaret Laurence: The First Lady of Manawaka'; John Ward's prize-winning film 'In Spring One Plants Alone'; 'A State of Siege', also directed by Vincent Ward and based on Janet Frame's novel of the same title; 'The Grass Is Singing'; 'The Woman at the Store', based on a Katherine Mansfield story; 'Staying On', film version of Paul Scott's novel; 'Women in Process'; 'The Getting of Wisdom', based on Henry Handel Richardson's novel; 'Caddie', based on a novel by Dymphna Cusack; 'The Singer and the Dancer' from a short story by Alan Marshall; 'South Africa Belongs to Us'; and 'Dilemma', based on Nadine Gordimer's novel *A World of Strangers*. Some copies of the announced programme are available on request.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

ATCAL and Commonwealth Institute Conference, 6 March 1982 —
Black Writers in Britain.

On 6 March 1982 a one-day conference, organized jointly by the Association for the Teaching of Caribbean and African Literature and the Commonwealth Institute, was held at the Commonwealth Institute in London on the theme of 'Black Writers in

As the opening speakers, poets Sebastian Clarke and Faustin Charles gave their views on the position of young black writers in Britain today and on the special problems faced by such writers in relation to the contemporary publishing scene. In the course of their discussion an inevitable contrast was drawn between the cultural situation of second-generation black British writers and that of writers from the Caribbean and Africa whose work began to be published in Britain after the Second World War. This issue was developed and expanded upon in an energetic and suggestive debate in the afternoon session which was chaired by Alex Pascall — producer of BBC Radio's *Black Londoners* programme — and framed around a panel consisting of playwrights Cas Phillips and Manapha Matura, novelist Buchi Emecheta, and publisher Margaret Busby. The main focus of the debate was on the subject of definition, identity and literary nationalism. In the course of the discussion it became apparent that there was some significant disagreement as to whether literary categorization was a necessary process of self-definition in the growth of a new tradition. Certain speakers resisted the application of easy critical formulae to a literature still involved in the exploration of new subjects and forms. While important common features and threads of continuity could be recognized, it was felt by these speakers that it would be a limited and limiting endeavour to insist upon a monolithic label for writers as individual and diverse as, say, Jean Rhys, George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, and Buchi Emecheta. The raising of the names of such celebrated and successful writers led back naturally to the question of publishing opportunities today and the problem of how to assess literary quality and value. A number of speakers accused the large, mainstream publishers of being too conservative in their publishing policies, of being essentially traditional in choosing to publish only the established writers from outside the orthodox English literary tradition. Others disagreed and argued that the big publishers were more willing than in the past to experiment and commission less well-known artists.

One of the highlights of the conference consisted of poetry readings by Frederick Williams and James Berry. James Berry gave a fine reading, among other pieces, of his recent Poetry Society Prize Poem 'Fantasy of an African Boy'.

SUSHEILA NASTA

Fourth International Janheinz-Jahn Symposium, Mainz, 21-23 May 1982.

The fourth international Janheinz Jahn Conference had as its theme 'The Woman in Africa as Writer and Literary Figure'. Not surprisingly, the organizers of the conference had invited female African writers and critics to give talks about various aspects of their struggle. Miriam Tlali from South Africa spoke about women in rural areas and cities, Annette M'chape d'Erneville from Senegal about women and religion and about the great impact which Mariama Ba's book *Such a Long Letter* has had on the literary scene of Senegal, and Wangku Matenjwa from Kenya about the treatment of women in African literature.

The speakers were faced with the impossible task of representing African women, a task which was made even more difficult by the great variation in their ages and person-

alties. Anneke M'baye had gained the status of a pioneer in the battle for basic female rights and self-respect, and she carried with her an aura of a fighter to whom much respect is due, but whose views have been partly superseded by a following and more angry generation. Wangjiku Matenjwa was of that generation. Very firmly rooted in the Ngugi school of criticism she refused to contemplate any notion of global sisterhood with what she called 'Western bourgeois feminism' but instead she drew attention to neo-colonial economic exploitation as the real source of inequality.

Despite the potential emotional content of the subject the talks moved along much in the manner of an ordinary academic conference until the last session. It seems ironic that it should be the talk given by a German writer, Ingeborg Drewitz which acted as a catalyst for the pent-up emotions of the predominantly young and feminist participants. The chair as taken over by a woman, the vocabulary gained a recognisable feminist slant, and the conference sprang into belated life with a debate between the European and African participants about the aims of feminism. It was soon discovered that there was very little shared ground, that the Western feminist discussions about mother/daughter relationship, about lesbian or political feminism meant very little to the African participants who were concerned with gaining basic social acceptance and rights and not with changing their consciousness. If this ground had been covered on the first day of the conference it could perhaps have moved on to discuss the touchy and important subject of the role of feminism in a colonized or neo-colonized country, but as it was, the conference was a due warning against too easy assumptions of universal sisterhood.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

Awards

SAHITYA ACADEMY AWARD, 1981

The Sahitya Academy, India's National Academy of Letters, selected Jayanta Mahapatra's book *Relationships* for its 1981 award. This is the first time that English poetry in India has been given such an award. Other award winners have included R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao.

EAGLALS (EUROPE) SHORT STORY COMPETITION

The EAGLALS Short Story Competition has been won by John Clanchy of Australia for his story 'The Lie of the Land' which appears in this issue. Other stories which were highly commended and which will or have appeared in *Kunapipi* include Mark O'Connor's 'Letter Perfect', Doreen Campbell's 'Five Stars for Mr Tompkins', and David Vidler's 'Big Smoke Woman'.

COMMONWEALTH POETRY PRIZE

The Commonwealth Poetry Prize, an annual award worth £500, has been won by Philip Salom of Western Australia for his collection of poems *The Silent Piano* (Freemantle Arts Centre Press, A\$4.00).

CANADA/AUSTRALIA LITERARY AWARD FOR 1981

The winner of the Canada/Australia Literary Award for 1981 is the Canadian fiction writer Leon Rooke.

The prize, which includes 3,000 dollars Canadian and a trip to Australia, is designed to make Australians and Canadians familiar with each other's writers. In alternate years an Australian writer receives the cash award and travels to Canada.

The inaugural award in 1976 went to Australian playwright John Romeril. Canadian writer Alice Munro was the winner in 1977. She was followed by Australian poet Thomas Shapcott (1978), Canadian poet Michael Ondaatje (1979), and Australian novelist Roger McDonald (1980). The prize is awarded for a writer's total production rather than for a single work and there are no restrictions on genre — novelists, playwrights and poets are eligible.

The current winner, Leon Rooke, is best known for his novel *Fat Woman* (Oberon, 1980) which was nominated for the Governor General's Award in fiction. Although Rooke had been writing short stories since the sixties, *Fat Woman* was his first novel. The work is the story of Ella Mae Hopkins, a woman not only large of body ('gluttony, thy name is Hopkins'), but also large of soul.

In 1981 Rooke published a short story collection called *Death Suite* (ECW Press) and another novel *The Magician in Love* (Aya Press). A new novel, *Shakespeare's Dog*, will be out in September.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

John Glenchy is Australian and has won several major prizes for his short stories; *Mark O'Connor*, Australian poet who is at present writer in residence at James Cook University. He recently won the John Shaw Nielsen prize for poetry; *Michael Sharkey*, Australian poet who teaches at New England University, N.S.W.; *Graeme Kinross Smith* teaches at Deakin University, Australia; *Paul Sherrard* teaches at Flinders University, South Australia; *Agnes Sam* is a South African of Indian descent who is now living in England; *Stephen Watson* teaches at the University of Cape Town, South Africa; *Stephen Gray* is a South African poet and novelist who teaches at Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg; *Ian Stephen* was born on the Isle of Lewis where he still lives. He is a writer and auxiliary coast guard and has published poetry and short stories in many magazines. *Sam Maynard* is the staff photographer on the island newspaper who has had various exhibitions in Edinburgh plus freelance work. The poet and photographer are working on a joint project trying to capture the spirit of the island through poetry and photographs.

Some are to appear shortly in *London Magazine* and *Gracetrax*. Dangaroo Press plan on publishing a volume of their work; Tony Coner is a Canadian whose poems and short stories have appeared in Canadian, American and Australian journals; Brian Walker works as a janitor at the University of Minnesota and devotes the remainder of his waking hours to poetry. His poems have appeared in over fifty journals throughout the world; Robert Stepto teaches at Yale University in the Afro-American Studies Department; Elaine Campbell teaches at Regis College, Massachusetts; John Agard — poet and actor, has had two books published in his own country, Guyana — *Shoot Me With Flowers*, a collection of poems and *Quetzy de Sautour*, a story in verse. He has also had two children's books published in Britain by Bodley Head, *Letters For Lettie* and *Two-Hole Two*. He has recently won the 1981 Casa de Las Americas Poetry Competition; Nova Fagi Brazik comes from Papua-New Guinea; Raoul Granqvist teaches at the University of Umeå, Sweden; Bernath Lindfors is editor of *Research in African Literature*.

Mark MacLeod teaches at Macquarie University, Sydney; Diana Brydon teaches at the University of British Columbia; Simon Garrett teaches at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand; Alamgir Hashmi is a Pakistani poet and academic who is at present living in Switzerland; Kirpal Singh is from Singapore and is at present teaching at the University of Papua New Guinea; Michael Chapman teaches at UNISA, Pretoria; John Barnes has resigned from Copenhagen University to return to Wales and devote himself to writing full-time; Donald W. Hannah teaches at the University of Aarhus; Kirsten Holst Petersen teaches at the University of Aarhus; Tayofo Ngege is a post-graduate student at the University of Austin, Texas.

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